An Exploratory Study of Graduate Employability in the Kurdistan Region – Iraq

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor of Education by

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis represents my own work

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July 2023

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis and the completion of this Ed.D. to Bella and William.

Acknowledgements

I would like to give my sincere thanks, gratitude, and appreciation to Dr. Ian Willis, my primary supervisor, who supported and guided me with patience in the writing of this thesis.

To my secondary supervisor, Dr. Anthony Edwards, I extend my thanks for giving his critical feedback of this thesis for its improvement.

I would like to further thank Dr. Mariya Ivancheva, who was my initial primary supervisor, for her help and guidance with the proposal, ethical approval, and data collection and analysis stages.

To Dr. Vikki O'Donnell, my initial secondary supervisor, I also give thanks.

Finally, to my friends and family, and all the people who at some point have helped me with this thesis, thank you.

Abstract

This case study explores graduate employability within the Kurdistan Region-Iraq (KRI). A region whose government adopted a rentier style of governance and which until 2014 placed thousands of graduates of public higher educational institutions (HEIs) into public sector employment, thereby masking true unemployment rates. In 2014, the government introduced a public sector hiring freeze. Four years later, the youth unemployment rate for those with a high school diploma or higher stood at 15 percent (KRSO, 2018). A UNESCO (2019) labour market report shows that employers in KRI are dissatisfied with local graduates' foreign language skills and specialised knowledge as well as other complaints that sometimes results in a preference for hiring foreign workers over local workers. The results of the UNESCO report allude to the need for higher education students in KRI to upskill themselves while at university. However, are graduates truly in control over their graduate employability or are there other factors external to graduates that negatively impact it? Using Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 2002) theories of habitus and capital and Freire's (1970/2014) critical pedagogy to conceptualise the data, this study explores why some graduates are more employable than others, which stakeholders are considered responsible for graduate employability, what policies and practices external to graduates impact their graduate employability, and finally, how HEIs in KRI can improve their students' employability. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals who represent four stakeholders, namely private sector employers, government ministry employees, academic and administrative staff of private and public HEIs, and training providers. The overall picture from the findings show that graduates of private HEIs are more employable than graduates of public HEIs, that policies and practices external to

graduates impact their employability positively and negatively, and that improvements in pedagogy, the internship programme, and degree programmes offered could improve graduate employability.

Key words: graduate employability, Kurdistan Region-Iraq, higher education reform, habitus, cultural capital, social capital, wasta, critical pedagogy

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List of acronyms

CDC	Career Development Centre
CoP	Community of practice
CPD	Continuous professional development
DPM	Deputy Prime Minister
Ed.D.	Doctorate in Education
GPA	Grade point average
HCDP	Human Capacity and Development Programme
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher educational institution
HoD	Head of Department
HR	Human resources
IAB	Industry Advisory Board
ICT	Information and communications technology
IREX	International Research and Exchanges Board
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region – Iraq
KTU	Kurdistan Teachers' Union
MHESR	Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoP	Ministry of Planning
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
UN	United Nations
UoL	University of Liverpool
WIL	Work-integrated learning
ZPD	Zone of proximal development

Chapter 1 Introduction

In this chapter, an introduction to the context of the study is given and followed by the how, why, and when graduate employability became an issue in the Kurdistan Region – Iraq (KRI) as well as the importance of this topic for the region. Then the findings of two labour market reports by RAND (Shatz, Constant, Luoto, Smith & Abramzon, 2014) and UNESCO (2019) are summarised. Followed by an explanation of the purpose of this study, my positionality, definition of terms, the organisation of the thesis, and concluding with the chapter summary.

1.1 Background of the study

KRI is a region situated in northern Iraq and since the no-fly zone was imposed over the region in 1991 by the United States, Britain, and France, the region has had semi-autonomous status. The no-fly zone provided the Kurds with protection and safety and made possible the first parliamentary and presidential elections, and in 1992, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was formed (US.Gov.KRD, 2023).

Figure 1.1

Map of Kurdistan Region-Iraq

Geographically, KRI is made up of four governates each named after their capital cities, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, and Halabja (see figure 1.1). The data collection of this case study is bound by the geographical area of Erbil Governate of KRI (see figure 1.2), yet the results are relevant to higher educational institutions (HEIs) across the region (see chapter four). Economically, development and construction have been unequally shared between and within governates (Ali, 2021; Jayid, Küçükkeleş, & Schillings, 2021) with Erbil and Sulaymaniyah cities seeing the most investment and economic growth.

Figure 1.2

Map of Erbil Governate

Politically, KRI is carved into two zones ruled by the Barzani and Talabani families creating a kleptocratic (Wahab, 2023) "duopoly" (Saleem & Skelton, 2019, p.2). The Barzani family leads the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and is dominant in the Erbil and Duhok governates. The Talabani family leads the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party and is dominant in the Sulaymaniyah and Halabja governates. The rivalry between the KDP and PUK resulted in a Kurdish civil war in the 1990s (Arif, 2022; Wahab, 2020), the de facto carving of KRI into two separately governed territories by

the KDP and PUK (Hakeem, 2017) which command two separate *peshmergas* (armies) (Hakeem, 2017; Seyder, 2017; Sümer & Joseph, 2019), and which has seen the two political parties divide the government ministries between them with parity according to the Strategic Agreement both parties are signatory to (Arif, 2022). Bali (2018; see also Anaid, 2019; Aziz, 2017; Rubin, 2016) says these two parties effectively control the KRG, the oil rents that the KRG uses to finance its rentier system of governance, and the private sector through the two parties' families' monopolisation and oligopolisation of it.

Demographically, KRI's population is young with half under the age of 32 years and one third below the age of 15 (KRSO, 2018). Since 2014, approximately 24,000 higher education (HE) graduates enter the labour market annually, fuelling what is now "chronic unemployment" (Jayid et al., 2021, p. 39) of the 15–34-year-old demographic (KRSO, 2018).

1.1.1 Graduate employability in KRI

In KRI, the issue of graduate employability is a relatively new phenomenon because until 2014, the year in which the region suffered concurrent financial disasters, graduates from public HEIs were de facto given positions in the public sector (Jayid et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2019). The KRG, operating the same as other rentier states across the Middle East uses public funds to finance an overstaffed public sector. Up until 2016, more than 80 percent of the public budget was spent on salaries, pensions, and other subsidies (Khalid, 2021). Out of a population of 6 million, 1.2 million people work in the public sector (Jayid et al., 2021), which is in part because thousands of graduates from public HEIs were, until 2014, placed into public sector positions upon graduation. However, in 2014, the economic boom that the region had economically prospered

under for a decade came to an end and the KRG could no longer finance its overstaffed public sector.

The year 2014 was a financially ruinous one for the KRG. It began in January with the government in Baghdad responding to the KRG beginning to export oil independently by halting the transfer of the region's annual budget of $12 billion that had been used to cover the KRG's public payroll (Coles, El Gamal, & Zhdannikov, 2015; World Bank, 2016). The year ended with the price of a barrel of oil being 40 percent less than at the start. In between these two events, ISIS invaded Iraq, KRI's peshmerga became embroiled in war to defend the region, and 1.8 million internally displaced people and refugees descended on KRI (Mamakani, 2016). Resultantly, investors lost confidence in the region (World Bank, 2016). The KRG's response was to freeze public sector hiring (Jayid et al., 2021; World Bank, 2016) and direct graduates of public HEIs to the private sector. The issue of graduate employability had finally reached KRI.

From 2014, the KRG put the onus on the private sector to provide employment opportunities for KRI's graduates. However, even during the economic boom years before 2014, the private sector could not keep pace with the number of graduate jobseekers entering the labour market (Monteabaro & Atroshi, 2014). Between 2012 to 2020, approximately 14,500 graduates of four-year HE programmes annually entered the labour market from HEIs in the region (Shatz et al., 2014). In the period 2012-2014, the private sector was losing jobs at a rate of 13,000 per year whereas in comparison the public sector was adding jobs at a rate of 17,000 per year (World Bank, 2016). This leads to the question of what changes had been introduced into KRI's economic environment that would enable the private sector to begin absorbing the region's graduates during a period that was witnessing private sector investment decline.

News headlines in the region are increasingly filled with reports of leading political figures calling on HEIs to produce employable graduates for the private sector (Dri, 2019; "Education reforms", 2021) amid catastrophic and unabating levels of unemployment among university graduates (Aziz, 2017). The youth unemployment rate for those who hold a high school diploma or higher stands at 15 percent (KRSO, 2018). One aim of this study is to provide actionable recommendations for HEIs in KRI to improve their graduates' employability as they have been directed to do so by leading political figures.

1.1.2 The RAND and UNESCO labour market reports

Here, the results of two labour market reports are summarised. The first report, *An Assessment of the Present and Future Labor Market in the Kurdistan Region-Iraq* (Shatz et al., 2014), was prepared RAND and is referred to as the RAND report. The second report, *Assessment of the Labour Market and Skills Analysis: Iraq and Kurdistan Region-Iraq*, was prepared by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2019) and is referred to as the UNESCO report. Both of these labour market reports are based on empirical research done within the past ten years in KRI, so they are valuable sources of private sector employer perceptions on the reported skills gap, relevance of HE for the private sector labour market and on KRI's graduates themselves.

The RAND (Shatz et al., 2014) labour market report focuses only on KRI whereas the UNESCO (2019) labour market report covers federal Iraq and KRI. In the UNESCO report, some data refer to all Iraq, and some refer to KRI only, and it is not always made clear which economic region the data are referring to. Moreover, the UNESCO report focuses on occupations for technical and vocational education and training (TVET)

graduates with the aim of improving the provision of TVET in Iraq. As almost 30,000 students are enrolled in HE TVET institutions in KRI, the report is relevant. As the UNESCO report is broken down into eight sectors each with its own detailed report, it is the summary report that is referred to in this study. A final note to add is that the findings of the RAND report are used as one data source for the UNESCO report. The RAND report (Shatz et al., 2014) says many jobs in the region are filled by foreigners. Thirty-seven percent of large companies said they have to hire workers from outside of the region despite it being more costly for them citing difficulties in hiring people for technical occupations as one reason. A second reason given by large and multinational companies is that local graduates lack skills. The UNESCO report (2019) confirms this finding and reports that in some sectors, including information and communications technology (ICT) and manufacturing, foreign workers are preferred because of a lack of specialised knowledge and foreign language skills in local graduates. Other areas that employers say graduates are lacking in include creative thinking, digital technology, and continuous learning (UNESCO, 2019).

The UNESCO (2019) report highlights how the labour market in some sectors is saturated with graduates for which there are simply not enough degree-level jobs or for which the degrees are not relevant. For example, in the ICT sector, software developers, web and multimedia developers, and database designers are all occupations that are identified as being in need but without a pool of local qualified candidates from which to hire. The construction sector requires just nine percent of workers to have a tertiary level qualification, but the sector is recorded as hiring 70 percent of workers with tertiary level qualifications, which means that graduates are being underemployed or that companies are top heavy with management level employees. The UNESCO report points to the latter, describing the construction sector as an inverse pyramid where high

level occupations are represented too highly and workers who are skilled or semi-skilled are under-represented.

Both reports provide useful insight into hiring practices in KRI. The RAND report (Shatz et al., 2014) says that word of mouth is the most common method of hiring with 63 percent of respondents saying this is their preferred method. The UNESCO (2019) report says that when hiring, their respondents said that they are less concerned about formal qualifications and practical experience and instead look at age and their social relation to the candidate. These findings complement the RAND report in relation to its findings that hiring practices are informal and also points to the need of having connections (known as *wasta* in KRI) to gain employment.

Is it a matter of graduates upskilling themselves to close the skills gap as reported in the RAND (Shatz et al., 2014) and UNESCO (2019) reports? What other factors impact on graduate employability within KRI? The statistics on youth, specifically graduate, unemployment in KRI affirm the importance of this research. Could a skills deficit as reported by private sector employers in the RAND and UNESCO reports be responsible for the unemployment figures? Or are there more complex factors that impact on graduate employability? Factors that include the structure and quality of HE provision, institutional policies and practices, and sociocultural norms and values. And what about the involvement of other stakeholders, including the KRG and its relevant ministries, HEIs, and private sector employers? As HEIs are globally touted as being responsible for graduate employability, what improvements can HEIs make to produce hireable graduates?

1.2 Thesis purpose and research questions

The aim of this qualitative research project is to construct a holistic picture of graduate employability in KRI using data collected from within Erbil Governate. The research questions are:

1. Why are some graduates perceived as less employable than other graduates or other jobseekers in the private sector?
2. Which stakeholder(s) (the government, government ministries, HEIs, and private employers) is/are perceived as responsible for graduate employability and why?
3. How do stakeholders' policies, practices, and actions affect the employability of graduates in KRI?
4. How can HEIs improve their students' employability throughout their undergraduate programmes of study?

The recommendations in the final chapter of this thesis are aimed at both the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) and HEIs. Mainstream employability discourses espouse that HEIs are responsible for equipping their students with employability skills and preparing them for the labour market (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). In KRI, the MHESR regulates to greater and lesser degrees the public and private HEIs which is why this ministry is also included as the audience for which this thesis is targeted.

1.3 Positionality

My HE background is in religion, Islam specifically, the culture, society, and politics of the Middle East and then later in teaching (of English language). Since

secondary school, I have been interested in how religion is used as a tool to govern society in relation to its politics, and social and cultural mores and values, which led me to move to the Middle East. Since becoming a teacher, and particularly since starting this doctoral journey, I have become interested in how education as well as religion is used as a socially reproductive tool in societies and the impact that this has on learner outcomes. For example, in Bahrain, which is where I was teaching when I started this Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.), a report, *How will the GCC Close the Skills Gap?* (Ernst & Young, 2015), said that there was a skills gap between the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council's graduates and the private sector labour market. To address the gap, policies to modernise education had been implemented in Bahrain (Hayes, Mansour, & Fisher, 2015), which is how I came to teach there. I observed the differences in teaching methods between Western and Middle Eastern teachers. The former used methods aligned with constructivism whereas the latter employed rote learning in their classes. In this teaching post, I observed how education (and religion) was being used as a tool to both uphold the Bahraini status quo and to transform Bahraini society from being dependent on the rentier state for employment to independently seeking out private sector employment.

In one module on this Ed.D., we were encouraged to reflect on the reproductive and/or transformative nature of our personal learning experiences. This prompted me to look at how possession of cultural and social capital, and the knowledge of how to play the game can influence the extent to which educational outcomes can be reproductive and/or transformative (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986). Reflecting on my personal circumstances, I opine that I am biased towards a belief that education tends to be more reproductive than transformative especially when factors external to education are

considered, such as an individual's possession of cultural and social capital, and their knowledge of how to play the game.

My background in Applied Linguistics and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) influences my preference towards constructivist learning as constructivist learning principles are generally used within TESOL classrooms. Constructivism could be described as anathema to rote learning as used in KRI's classrooms throughout the educational levels (see chapter three). My dislike of rote learning combined with my curiosity of the paradoxical relationship that the Middle East's authoritarian-leaning regimes have with educational reform led me to become an advocate of Freire's (1970/2014) critical pedagogy. Through questioning the possibility and complexity of how educators in the Middle East might transform their pedagogy to Freire's critical pedagogy, I came to Bourdieu's (1977, 2002) theory of habitus.

Since 2018, which was when I relocated back to KRI for this research, I have worked for two private HEIs as an English lecturer. This has given me the opportunity to observe HE students' frustration regarding their employability and the drive to explore the phenomenon. No individuals from either of these two HEIs participated in this study.

1.4 Definitions of terms

1.4.1 Graduate employability

For the purpose of this study, Jackson and Bridgstock's (2021) definition of (graduate) employability is used as a starting point. Employability is a "multi-dimensional, lifelong and life-wide phenomenon that is malleable and driven by the individual yet encouraged by and facilitated by HE" (p. 724). To this definition, I add

that a graduate's employability is impacted by stakeholders and factors external to themselves.

1.4.2 Iraq

Where data from reports refer to Iraq, this means that there is none specifically for KRI and that the report's findings include all of Iraq, both federal Iraq and the semi-autonomous KRI.

1.4.3 Rentierism and the social contract in KRI

Essential characteristics of rentier governance is where the generation and distribution of wealth is tightly controlled by those who have power, and an unwritten social contract is drawn up between the ruling apparatus and the people whereby wealth is distributed to the people in exchange for their political acquiescence. In KRI, the two political families, the Barzanis and Talabanis, control the generation and distribution of wealth (Anaid, 2019; Aziz, 2017; Bali, 2018; Rubin, 2016). The KRG is an entity used to distribute the wealth through the form of public sector employment and other subsidies. In return for their 'share' of the wealth, society is expected to give their political support to one of the two families.

1.4.4 The RAND labour market report

The RAND labour market report (Shatz et al., 2014) is referred to extensively throughout this study. There are other reports also prepared by RAND that appear in this study and are not to be confused with the labour market report prepared by Shatz et al. (2014) and which from hereon will be referred to as the RAND report.

1.4.5 The UNESCO labour market report

The UNESCO (2019) labour market report is also referred to extensively throughout this study and will from hereon be referred to as the UNESCO report.

1.4.6 Elite HEIs/top tier HEIs

Elite HEIs or top tier HEIs refer to a small number of HEIs in KRI that are English medium and fee-paying (Jayid et al., 2021).

1.4.7 Second tier HEIs

Second tier HEIs refer to the non-elite/top tier private HEIs in KRI as well as all public HEIs.

1.5 Organisation of thesis

This study is presented in six chapters. Chapter one provides the background to the study and establishes the need for and importance of an exploratory study into graduate employability in KRI. Chapter two, the literature review, begins with a discussion of global employability discourses and graduate employability in KRI. This is followed by a discussion of the two theoretical frameworks used in this study, namely Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 2002) theories of habitus and capital and Freire's (1970/2014) theory of critical pedagogy. Chapter three is a detailed presentation of the case study of KRI and explores the region's rentier style of governance, its education system, and the sociocultural factors of wasta and collectivism. This chapter concludes with the presentation of the research questions.

Chapter four discusses the research design and methodology used in this study. First, my epistemological position is given. Then the approach, strategies, and analysis employed in this study are explained. The research procedures that include the sampling and data collection are then explained. Finally, the last section of this chapter discusses the ethical considerations of this study. Chapter five presents the findings and discussion together and is split into four sub-chapters according to the four research

questions. The final chapter, six, presents the recommendations of this study along with its contribution to knowledge, limitations, and ideas for future research.

1.6 Summary

In this chapter, the case has been made for the importance of exploring the issue of graduate employability in KRI. Graduate employability has become a pressing issue since the economic downturn and consequent public sector hiring freeze in 2014 and requires attention and action if the high unemployment rate among the graduate demographic is to be reduced. Despite the high levels of unemployment among graduates, private sector employers report that they are hiring foreign workers and citing a lack of experience and a skills deficit among local graduates as reasons why (Shatz et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2019).

Chapter 2 Literature review

2.1 Introduction

The literature review begins with an overview of two assumptions of global employability discourses before contextualising graduate employability discourses in KRI. Following this, Bourdieu and Freire's theories are presented. Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 2002) theories of habitus and capital provide a framework in which the social structures and cultural factors that shape and impact an individual's agency and access to opportunities in education and the labour market can be explored and analysed. Freire's (1970/2014) critical pedagogy provides a complementary framework to Bourdieu's habitus in exploring individuals' agency to bring about change. The chapter ends with a comparison of Bourdieu's and Freire's beliefs on the nature of pedagogy.

2.2 Global employability discourses

In the knowledge-based global economy, governments around the world, including the KRG, are promoting employability discourses (McCowan, 2015). These discourses say there is such a thing as an ideal graduate who has control over their employability, and the recruitment process is neutral, objective, value free and played out on a level playing field.

2.2.1 Assumption #1 The ideal graduate has control over their employability

Traditionally, academic credentials were the benchmark for recruitment. However, following the massification of HE and the consequent flooding of the labour market with non-traditional graduates (usually working class), employers began demanding that graduates be literate in soft skills in addition to their degree (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Brown, Hesketh & Williams, 2003; McCracken, Currie, & Harrison, 2016; Tomlinson, 2008). Possession of a degree became a tick in the box that only gets

applicants past the first stage of the recruitment process (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). Possession of soft skills is what makes the ideal graduate. With the shift in focus to the possession of soft skills and personal attributes, failure to find employment is attributed to "personal failure" (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006, p.311) of becoming the ideal graduate (Burke, Scurry, Blenkinsopp, & Graley, 2017) rather than due to factors external to the graduate. The ideal graduate, Boliver (2017) says, is a ploy used by employers to be able to continue using prejudiced hiring practices to protect their organisation's cultural capital.

Employability discourses say that there has been a democratisation of labour, whereby individual members of the workforce are empowered through the demand for their skills and knowledge and the abolition of the long tenure contracts of the past (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001) and resultantly are able to sell their labour to the highest bidder. Brown et al. (2003) contend that this is false and introduced the idea that employability is described in absolute and relative terms. Absolute terms represent knowledge and skills that the individual possesses and can rely upon whereas relative terms represent the labour market and employer-needs, which the individual cannot rely upon. Conceptualising employability in this way, shows how individuals' absolute employability is subordinated to the relative demand of the labour market. A condition which Brown with Tholen (Tholen & Brown, 2017) restated in a later paper debunking the myths of graduate employability. Individuals can only sell their labour to the highest bidder if there is a high demand and/or a shortage for that labour and so employers remain with the upper hand. Employers dictate what skills and attributes are valued and control the recruitment process. Employers' claims that individuals are responsible is a ruse that frees both governments and employers of their traditional

responsibility towards graduates (Brown et al, 2003) and enables employers to use discriminatory hiring practices (Boliver, 2017).

2.2.2 Assumption #2 The recruitment process is neutral, objective, value free and played out on a level playing field

Employability discourses emphasise that graduates have equal opportunities and chances of success in finding employment (Stoten, 2018). However, each student has a different pool of resources to draw upon as well as different experiences of playing the game as per Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 2002) theories of habitus and capital. For example, traditional students (the middle classes) usually possess more cultural and social capital than their non-traditional (the working classes) counterparts. This is to say that traditional students are at a distinct advantage in the graduate labour market compared to their non-traditional counterparts. Traditional students after graduating from elite universities (more valuable cultural capital) can use their families' connections (social capital) to play the game well (habitus) and secure graduate employment whereas non-traditional students are more likely to attend non-elite universities (less valuable cultural capital) and have no valuable connections (no social capital) that can help them play the game.

The massification of HE is commonly viewed as a positive attempt by governments to level the playing field by affording equal access to both HE and the graduate labour market. Both of which were sites that had largely been out of reach to the majority of non-traditional students previously. However, not all degrees are created equal. Governments may have granted equal access to HE but not to individual HEIs. Holmes (2013) says, in the UK, "a hierarchy of universities" (p. 547) exists where recruiters can use prejudice hiring practices by filtering out graduate applicants from

lower ranking HEIs (see Nogales, Cȯrdova, & Urquidi, 2020 for a Bolivian example) that are usually attended by non-traditional students (Boliver, 2017).

Boliver (2017) says that the recruitment process is characterised by structural discrimination where employers hire in their own image, and recruitment can be based on the subjective gut feeling of the recruiter which determines whether they think the applicant is the right "fit" (p. 429) or not. Before the massification of HE, working class students did not usually attend university. Therefore, graduate employment was preserved exclusively for the middle and upper classes of society. Employers' discriminatory hiring processes as described by Boliver can be explained by Bourdieu (1984):

> The strategies which one group may employ to try to escape downclassing and to return to their class trajectory, and those which another group employs to rebuild the interrupted path of a hoped-for trajectory, are now one of the most important factors in the transformation of social structures (p. 147).

What Boliver suggests is that in a labour market suffering from social congestion (Brown, 2013), graduate employers employ discriminatory and subjective hiring practices that act against hiring the working classes, such as filtering out applications of graduates from non-elite HEIs, to defend their organisation's cultural capital.

2.3 Global employability discourse and KRI

Literature on global employability discourses is western-centric so here is a discussion of how well the Western literature's suppositions 'fit' into the context of KRI. The first disjunction is that unlike in most Western countries, HE in KRI is free, and all high school graduates who have the required minimum grade point average (GPA) are encouraged to continue their education. In the 2021/2022 academic year, for example, the minister of the MHESR guaranteed public university spaces for 83 percent of all who

applied (Jangiz, 2021). Unlike in the West, where massification of HE is considered to have been undertaken to provide equal access to HE and the labour market, access to free public HE in KRI is but one part of the rentier social contract made between a government and its people. Romani (2009) likens HEIs in the Middle East to public waiting rooms. This is to say that public HEIs are places where young adults go to delay their entry into public sector employment (Romani, 2009; UNESCO, 2019). However, in KRI, access to public sector employment is now withheld from the majority of graduates (some sectors in the public sector, such as healthcare, still accept graduates; World Bank, 2016). By promising to admit 83 percent of all public university applicants, the KRG and MHESR can be accused of being complicit in creating a moral panic around graduate employability.

Moreover, whereas the graduate premium in the West refers to earning a degree to gain entry into the graduate labour market, in KRI the graduate premium could be better described as being guaranteed a place in the public sector at a higher pay scale (Hansen et al., 2014) after having successfully waited at university. In the West, the degree only gets a graduate past the first stage of the recruitment process (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). In KRI, for public sector positions there is no competitive recruitment process, instead there is a placement process where graduates are placed in public sector positions (Hansen et al., 2014). How well academic credentials serve a graduate in the private sector recruitment process is one area that this thesis explores.

The RAND and UNESCO reports say that private sector employers report that graduates in KRI lack skills. This claim upholds the idea of an ideal graduate, which Boliver (2017) contends is a cover for employers' discriminatory hiring practices. Boden and Nedeva (2010) say that governments around the world support employers'

discriminatory employment practices. Likewise, the KRG is yet to equalise the labour laws that legislate the benefits and salaries in the public and private sectors. At the moment, the majority of workers in the private sector do not have access to the same rights and benefits as their public sector counterparts (Hansen et al., 2014) making the private sector an undesirable or even an unthinkable employment option (Monteabaro & Atroshi, 2014). Employability discourses talk of a democratisation of labour where workers are empowered through employer-demand for their skills and so forth but without equalisation between the public and private sectors, workers in the latter sector are disempowered without access to equal benefits and protective employee rights.

A final point is that despite there being universal free education for all in KRI, there exists a hierarchy of universities (Holmes, 2013). There are a small number of elite English medium private HEIs in KRI (Jayid et al., 2021) which educate an equally small proportion of KRI's university-age demographic. Many job descriptions in KRI specify the need for proficiency in English, so graduates of public Kurdish medium HEIs are lacking the cultural capital needed to compete against their privately educated counterparts. If HEIs are responsible for equipping students with employability skills, changes need to be implemented in the provision of HE in public HEIs to enable these institutions to produce graduates that can compete in the private sector graduate labour market.

2.4 Bourdieu's theories of habitus and capital

2.4.1 Habitus

The Bourdieuian concept of habitus provides researchers with an explanatory framework to explore how an individual thinks, perceives, and acts in the social world (Costa & Murphy, 2015). Bourdieu (1977) defines habitus as:

> Systems of durable, transposable *dispositions* [emphasis in original], structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them (p. 72).

Bourdieu's abstract definition can be broken down into two more straightforward tenets. First, habitus is made up of dispositions which are lasting and that can be transferred to different contexts or fields. These dispositions, which when internalised, make up an individual's interpretative framework through which they perceive the world which in turn directs their way of thinking and behaviour (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu explains how an individual's earliest interactions with their family and later at school have the greatest and enduring impact on the formation of their habitus. Moreover, the collective practices, norms, and values of society become embodied within an individual's habitus explaining how an individual can demonstrate the same beliefs and actions as a wider group while, however, appreciating that no people can have identical habitus' (Crossley, 2001).

Second, habitus is made up of a myriad of structures that go on to produce further structures that can either reinforce or transform an individual's way of thinking and behaviour. That is to say that when an individual faces a new situation, they unconsciously base their interpretation of the situation on their previous experiences, their habitus. Previous experiences create structures that provide input on how an individual can think and act in a new situation. Depending on the alignment between the habitus and the situation, or field, affects how well an individual succeeds in that particular situation. If the habitus is aligned with the field, this is likely to reinforce the habitus. Conversely, if the habitus is not aligned with the field, this can result in the reshaping of the habitus. Subsequent actions continue to either reinforce or reshape the

habitus (Stahl, 2015). Without the structure provided by the habitus, an individual's agency would be circumscribed by the need to process each situation as a completely new unencountered situation. Habitus, therefore, acts as a foundational structure that is used to inform and guide an individual's present and future thinking and behaviour.

A criticism of habitus is that it strips individuals of their agency to act and think for themselves. However, Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) stresses that habitus *directs* an individual based on their individual and collective past experiences but that the individual retains agency over their self. A later definition of habitus given by Bourdieu in an interview published in Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) defends the concept of habitus and highlights its transformative potential:

> Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an *open system of dispositions* [emphasis in original] that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal! (p. 133).

Despite Bourdieu's (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) clarification of the transformative potential of habitus, Bourdieu was quick to follow up by saying that he believes "there is a *relative irreversibility*" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133, emphasis in original) to the conditioning process of habitus. That is to say, an individual's earliest experiences with their family and in education have a profound and lasting effect on how they perceive, think, and act in the world. Bourdieu goes on to explain how individuals are far more likely to encounter situations that are congruent with their habitus than to enter into situations that are strikingly different enough to prompt a transformative shift in habitus.

2.4.1.1 Field

It is the relationship between habitus and field that provides the context within which habitus is either reinforced or transformed. Fields are structured, and its participants are governed by each field's culture and set of rules. The rules determine what is appropriate and valued and what is not. How well an individual navigates their way around a field and its culture and rules is determined by their habitus. If an individual's habitus aligns with the field's culture, they are like a "fish in water" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127) and will most likely succeed in the field. However, if an individual's habitus is not aligned with the field, they will struggle to be successful.

2.4.1.2 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a tool that can be utilised to support the transformative potential of habitus. To recall, habitus constantly runs in the background of the self without conscious awareness of it (Bourdieu, 1977). Reflexivity, which involves a conscious and critical examination of values, feelings, and actions can lead to a greater understanding of self (Bolton, 2009), which could prompt an individual to consciously question and ultimately transform their habitus. Bolton (2009) explains that reflexivity is a strategy that individuals can employ to understand their roles in society and how individuals often "create social or professional structures counter to [their] own values" (p. 14). This is to say that an individual's habitus directs them to behave in a predictable way that feels seemingly natural to them even if this behaviour counters their values. Reflexivity as a practice provides the individual with the means to critique and assess their values and behaviour, their habitus.

2.4.2 Capital

Within fields, individuals manoeuvre and compete for power and resources using their capital. Bourdieu (1986) explains there are three fundamental sources of capital, economic, cultural, and social that each adopt three different forms, embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Possession of capital to Bourdieu is equal to being in possession of power and the ability to control people. Cultural and social capital can ultimately be institutionalised in the form of property rights and titles, or more commonly today, positions and educational qualifications. Economic capital which disinterested Bourdieu relates to money and other material assets and is not discussed further unless in relation to cultural and social capital. Essentially, capital is used "to reproduce power relations and forms of access to resources that tend to reproduce existing distributions of power and capitals" (Bebbington, 2009, p. 165). That is to say that those who already possess cultural and social capital monopolise access to them, thereby reproducing the monopolisation of access to them and possession of power in society.

2.4.2.1 Cultural capital

Cultural capital's institutionalised form is educational qualifications. Economic capital can be transformed into valuable cultural capital by buying the best education that money can buy. Therefore, wealthy families have a monopoly over this form of capital as they can afford to enrol their children into privileged education at elite HEIs that possess more valuable organisational cultural capital than their less prestigious counterparts. Despite decades-long action in the UK to widen access to the most prestigious 'Russel Group' universities, Brown and James (2020) say that individuals who come from non-traditional backgrounds are still underrepresented at these HEIs and are much less likely to apply. Boliver's (2017) research outlines how elite

employers' hiring practices continue to favour graduates from elite institutions. This demonstrates the reproductive cycle of how cultural and economic capital are accessed and distributed. Wealthy families use their economic capital to monopolise access to cultural capital. By using their economic capital, their children graduate from elite institutions. The degree, from an elite institution, represents valuable cultural capital and can be considered as interest accrued on the economic capital invested in a university education, which is used to monopolise access to elite graduate jobs that goes on to generate more economic capital.

In lieu of the deflation in value of academic credentials (Boliver, 2017; Tomlinson, 2008), other interpretations of cultural capital have been suggested. Lareau and Weininger (2003) interpret cultural capital as the possession of competencies (or skills) that enable an individual to successfully adapt to different contexts with ease. Erickson (2008) supports this interpretation of cultural capital and explains that cultural capital is having "highly varied tastes combined with a keen sense of the rules of relevance of which kind of culture to use in which situation" (p. 347). Edgerton and Roberts (2014) simply interpret the possession of cultural capital as having "cultural versatility" (p. 198). These wider interpretations of cultural capital are representative of the behaviours and attributes that employability discourse says a graduate should have.

2.4.2.2 Social capital

Social capital is "membership in a group—which provides…. a 'credential' which enables them to buy credit, in the various senses of the word" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). Bourdieu (1986) explains that the value of social capital that is possessed by an individual is contingent upon the quality and size of the network of connections that the individual can call upon. Moreover, an individual's total amount of capital includes that

of all those who are members of the group. Membership in a group, however, is not assured and should not be taken for granted. Membership requires continued effort. Bourdieu explains how maintenance of these networks of connections is labour and time intensive but that the profitability of the connections rises proportionally to effort invested and the volume of social capital possessed. In its embodied form, social capital constitutes obligations and in its institutionalised form, constitutes titles or in modern-day society, high-level positions in government.

In practice, social capital establishes what Ledeneva (1998) coined an economy of favours. In this economy of favours, a scarce resource such as graduate employment can be secured through mobilizing your network of connections. When cultural capital is subordinated to social capital, this in effect means that meritocracy is subordinated to elitism and offers one explanation why some graduates are more hireable than others in the graduate labour market.

2.5 Freire's critical pedagogy

2.5.1 Critical pedagogy

A key principle of Freire's (1970/2014) critical pedagogy is that education is not neutral. Freire says that the educational process is focused on either producing individuals who conform to the status quo or on producing individuals who can critically analyse situations and be transformative forces in their world and challenge the status quo (Freire, 1970/2014). From the analysis of the word, pedagogy, it is clear that the transformative focus of education is the ideal. The word, pedagogy, has Greek roots and translates into, "to lead a child" (Macedo, 2000, p. 21). To lead is to direct, which shows that education is not neutral as leaders/directors are influenced by their own ideologies. A child is a symbol of transformation as to develop into adulthood, a child must go through many intellectual and physical transformative stages. Therefore,

to lead or educate a child, is to counsel them through their transformation into either becoming a conforming member of society or into a free-thinking being that is capable of transforming their world (Freire, 1970/2014).

2.5.1.1 The banking method: A pedagogy of domestication

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire (1970/2014) calls rote learning the banking method. In this method of learning, the attributes and roles of the teacher and student are prescribed and exist in duality to each other. The former is knowledgeable, and the latter exists in ignorance until their teacher grants them the gift of knowledge. The knowing teacher is a narrator, or a banker, who fills up their unknowing students through depositing their knowledge into them through narration. A good teacher is one who completely fills their students with their knowledge. A good student is one who sits and listens to their teacher and banks what they hear to memorise and repeat at a later time such as in an exam. Communication is unidirectional. That is to say that it is the teacher who narrates and the student who listens.

Freire's (1970/2014) ontological belief is that humans are not passive agents but are active forces who are capable of transformative action, and education is a key process that determines whether agents conform or are transformative. By passively banking the knowledge deposited in them, as opposed to questioning, analysing, and evaluating it, students fail to develop a critical consciousness. Ultimately, instead of questioning the reality deposited into them, students adapt to it and become domesticated and consequently silenced.

2.5.1.2 Pedagogy of freedom: *Education* not domestication

In Freire's (1996/2001) *Pedagogy of Freedom,* he explains that the goal of education is to stir a student's critical consciousness and become an active unfinished

being. A state of being that is anathema to the banking method because according to this method a good teacher is one who fills up their students completely with knowledge. Moreover, for Freire, students are not receptacles to be filled by teachers but are knowing individuals who are in a constant and never-ending process of becoming and learning (Freire, 1996/2001). In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire explains that the teacher's role is not to transfer their knowledge to their students. The aim of teaching and learning is for students to become conscious of their agency to transform the world. To meet this end, learning should be collaborative and empowering with both the teacher and students' curiosity fuelling the process.

Gannon's (2020) teaching manifesto, *A Radical Hope,* offers a more recent discussion on critical pedagogy. Gannon describes classrooms that use what Freire (1970/2014) coined as the banking method as "classroom[s] of death" (Gannon, 2020, p. 18) where creativity and liberation is stifled. Gannon stresses the need for teachers to construct an educational experience in their classrooms that is transformative rather than transactional. A classroom in which transformative learning takes place, Gannon writes, is an inclusive one. This is where all voices are heard and valued, not just the teacher's. Inclusion in education is important. Because if you feel included, you feel empowered. You feel that you have agency to be transformative, which is what Freire and Gannon contend is the purpose of education.

2.6 Bourdieu and Freire on pedagogy

Pedagogy is a central component of the HE system. Bourdieu (in Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990) describes pedagogy as a form of symbolic violence while Freire (1970/2014) says pedagogy "can perpetuate a culture of silence" (p.21). Where these two seminal thinkers diverge is that Bourdieu believes that all pedagogic action is

socially reproductive and therefore symbolically violent (Watkins, 2018) whereas Freire contends that if a critical pedagogy is adopted, pedagogic action can be socially transformative. Hence the use of 'can' in Freire's claim cited just above. In KRI, the norm is what Freire terms the 'banking method' of teaching and learning. As passive learners, students bank the knowledge deposited into them by their teachers. In terms of developing the higher order skills that are necessary to become competitive and successful in the private sector labour market, the banking method is inadequate (What is Rote Learning?, 2020) and is symbolically violent against its learners.

2.7 Summary

Through a presentation of the assumptions of employability discourse, the case has been established that individual graduates have little control over their employability. Nor are graduates, globally and likewise in KRI, competing for jobs on a level playing field. The graduate participants playing the game are in possession of varying amounts of Bourdieu's (1986) capital, which impacts the success of their social interactions with employers during the recruitment process. This calls into question whether it is just a matter of HE students in KRI upskilling themselves as per the findings in the RAND and UNESCO reports or whether there are other factors, such as habitus and the possession of capital or the weak and underdeveloped state of the private sector that are in play and which have a greater impact on graduate employability.

The first of Bourdieu's (1977, 2002) theories, habitus, is made up of a system of dispositions that are durable and transferable between fields. Dispositions are formed through social interactions, which explains why individuals have collective beliefs and actions that are demonstrative of a wider group while maintaining their individual

habitus. When faced with a new field, or situation, individuals unconsciously refer to their habitus to interpret the field and how to act in it. Though habitus is durable, it is not immoveable and can be transformed. However, as people tend to veer towards fields congruent with their habitus, Bourdieu explains that most often the habitus is reinforced rather than modified. Reflexivity is a tool that Bourdieu (1977) suggests employing to modify the habitus. Bourdieu reasons that as habitus runs in the background of the subconscious, by being reflexive, individuals can examine their way of thinking and their behaviour, question both, and ultimately transform themselves.

The second of Bourdieu's (1986) theories is capital. Individuals use cultural and social capital to uphold their status and position in society and so are tools of reproduction. Traditionally, educational qualifications constituted cultural capital; however, these no longer command the value that they once did due to a lack of scarcity. Lareau & Weininger (2003), Erickson (2008), and Edgerton & Roberts (2014) say that cultural capital is measured by an individual's ability to adapt adeptly to different contexts. The value of social capital depends on the quality and size of the network that individuals can call upon. Scarce resources like employment can be obtained through mobilising connections and by trading in favours.

Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990) views pedagogy as a form of symbolic violence, which is not dissimilar to Freire's (1970/2014) claim that pedagogy can be wielded as a tool of oppression. However, Freire's thinking is dissimilar to Bourdieu's as Freire believes that ultimately education can be transformative if the dualities between teacher and student cease to exist. Freire explains how traditional education often follows what he calls the banking method which places the teacher and students in a relationship of duality. The teacher as knowledgeable and knowing and

the students as ignorant and unknowing. The banking method upholds the notion that students are to be filled with knowledge that is deposited into them by their teacher. Once they are filled with their teacher's knowledge they are 'full' and 'complete'. Freire (1970/2014) says that this notion denies students to become knowledgeable of their permanent state of "incompletion" (p. 41) and of their ability to transform themselves and their world.

The banking method domesticates learners through instilling passivity into its learners as communication is unidirectional, from teacher to students. Domesticated learners lack a critical consciousness with which to question reality and so instead adapt to it. Gannon (2020) calls classrooms that use the banking method as classrooms of death. In which, he says, the goal of education is not to stir the critical consciousness within to discover and generate new knowledge but to provide a space where unidirectional transactions of old stale knowledge is deposited into passive learners. Denying these learners of their transformative agency.

To summarise, graduates have little control over their employability, and the recruitment process is not played out on a level playing field. Graduates possess varying levels of Bourdieu's (1986) cultural and social capitals that they can use to their advantage in the labour market. Moreover, an individual's behaviour and decisions are shaped and guided by their habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). An individual's habitus is made up of dispositions formed through their social interactions. It is an individual's earliest social interactions with their family and at school that can have a profound and lasting impact on their habitus and consequently on how they choose to play the game. This illustrates the importance of the role of education, which Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990) describes as being symbolically violent, in forming the habitus.

The habitus is durable yet changeable so with the right conditions and experiences and by employing reflexivity, an individual has the potential to transform themselves. This belief supports the need for adopting Freire's (1970/2014) critical pedagogy as Freire argues that the purpose of education is to be transformative.

Chapter 3 The Kurdistan Region-Iraq

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the context of KRI is explored in-depth. The chapter begins by exploring the relationship between the KRG's rentierist policies, which nurture dependency on it, and the preference shown for public sector employment before exploring the region's education system, and finally, some region-specific sociocultural factors. After which, the chapter is tied together by a summary before finally presenting the research questions.

3.2 Rentierism and dependency on the KRG as provider

This section explores the relationship of dependency between the KRG and its citizenry. To do so, the discussion begins in 1991 when the semi-autonomous region was carved out and how the decisions made at that time nurtured dependency of the people on the KRG, and which fostered a preference for public sector employment that persists until today.

3.2.1 Historical roots of dependency

In 1991, following decades of Saddam Hussein's oppressive rule and the Kurds of Iraq's liberatory struggle against it (Esposti, 2021), a no-fly zone over the Kurdish territory of northern Iraq was imposed by the United States, Britain, and France, and the semi-autonomous region was carved out and the KRG established in 1992 (US.Gov.KRD, 2023). The decisions and events of the first decade of the KRG's existence created an enduring societal habitus that embodies dependency on an institution external to the individual, namely the KRG, which persists until today.

From the outset, the KRG opted to continue with the rentier model of governance used by the regime in Baghdad. This model of governance is characterised by the social

contract between the government and its people, whereby the latter are 'looked after' by their government in return for their political acquiescence. That is to say that rentier governments use resources, characteristically derived from the sale of oil, to buy their citizen's support. Support for the KRG is realised through the provision of public sector employment, subsidies on commodities, and minimal taxation. All of which, cultivates dependency on the government as the provider.

A second factor that also fuelled dependency on the KRG during its first decade of existence are the double economic sanctions that were imposed on the region after the first Gulf War, and which continued until 2003. Natali (2007) explains how these double sanctions prevented KRI from starting an economic recovery following the years of neglect and destruction wrought on the Kurdish region by Saddam Hussein's policies as investment and imports into the region were prohibited. In a closed economy such as this, the only viable employer is the state. Moreover, the double sanctions created an environment conducive to the KRG continuing with a rentier model of governance. The two Kurdish administrations in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, governed by the two political parties, the KDP and PUK, respectively, "became efficient subcontractors" (Rogg & Rimscha, 2007, p. 829) for international donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In short, in the 1990s, the KRG, controlled by the KDP and PUK, used international humanitarian funding as its source of rent in lieu of oil profits.

During this period of early legacy building, dependency on the KRG to provide for the population's needs was instilled into society. A societal habitus of dependency on the KRG and/or the KDP and PUK was developed. This habitus endures till even today, proven by the preference shown for and dependency on public sector employment despite low wages paid to many public sector workers. Al-Bazzaz (2022) describes how

Iraq's graduates are desperate to "just to get a [public sector] job that would not pay more than a few hundred dollars a month, at best" despite the equivalent job in the private sector "typically pay[ing] double" (para. 4). Moreover, the payment of public sector salaries in KRI since 2014 has sometimes been delayed for months (Anaid, 2019; DeWeaver, 2015; Jayid et al., 2021).

3.2.2 The preference for public sector work

During the KRG's second decade, the economy boomed, but Bali (2018; see also Anaid, 2019; Aziz, 2017; Rubin, 2016) explains how the private sector remained small and underdeveloped due to the monopolisation and oligopolisation of markets by those in political power, namely the two powerful families, the Barzanis and Talabanis, who led the two political parties, the KDP and PUK, respectively. Moreover, people preferred, and still do, to work in the public sector under the patronage of one of the two families. The system of patronage in the public sector is lain bare in a report written for the Ministry of Planning (MoP). The report explains that in the public sector, people are hired in an unprofessional manner, given posts that they are unsuitable for, and that positions are created despite there being no need for them (MoP, 2013).

Moreover, Hansen et al. (2014) and Joseph and Sümer (2019) explain that performance expectations are higher in the private sector, which offers one explanation why work in the public sector is preferred. In the private sector, which is driven by profit margins and cost-efficient practices, performance expectations are high. In contrast, in KRI's public sector a job is for life regardless of performance (Hansen et al., 2014). Such job security is mostly unheard of in the private sector where an employee's future is often based on periodic performance evaluations according to their job description, which do not even exist in the public sector (Hansen et al., 2014). When a

job is guaranteed for life regardless of performance, it is problematic because frequently the incentive to improve oneself is diminished. Hansen et al. (2014) report negative perceptions of public sector workers who are described as "workers [who] do not like to work" (p. 51). In Bourdieuian terms, public sector workers are simply playing the game well according to the rules of the field. These workers have sold their political vote in exchange for a public sector job. As their vote equals a job for life, they can reason, why should they put in more effort than what is required?

In 2014, the KRG's rhetoric shifted as it emphasised the downsizing of the public sector through introducing a hiring freeze for all but a few essential professions and began directing graduates to the private sector (World Bank, 2016), thereby renegading on its end of the social contract. In spite of the KRG's hiring freeze, the two political parties, the KDP and PUK, continue to appoint their supporters with jobs in the public sector (Khalid, 2021; Saleem & Skelton, 2019; Jayid et al., 2021) paid for by the monopolisation of oil rents. In 2016, approximately 68 percent of the workforce were employed in the public sector, which Khalid (2021) says, made KRI second only to Cuba globally for public sector employment.

3.3 Education

3.3.1 An overview

The quality of education from kindergarten all the way through to university level is "exceptionally outdated" (Maneshi, 2019, p. 3) and needs vast improvement due in part to both Saddam Hussein's policies pre-2003 (Rubin, 2020) and the KRG's laissez-faire investment law of 2006 coupled with insufficient government regulations for private universities (Ahmad & Shah, 2016). During Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, education in the Kurdish areas stagnated as a policy of Arabisation was enforced on the Kurdish region of Iraq (Faris, 2015). Arabisation of Kurdish lands denied Kurds their

identity, language, and culture. Education as a tool that is used by people to ensure the survival and growth of their identity, language, and culture was weaponised to annihilate Kurdish society for “if a nation lost its language, it would lose its life” (Al-Husri, 1957, cited in Salih, 2019, p. 38, original source in Arabic). Materials and instruction were in Arabic, schools were often destroyed in Kurdish areas, and parents were afraid to send their daughters to school in case they were attacked by Saddam Hussein’s forces (Faris, 2015). After Saddam Hussein was removed from power in 2003, enrolment numbers for school and university increased. Ahmad and Shah (2016) explain that schools were built to accommodate the increased numbers of students, and space at HEIs was limited as demand was too great.

The Investment Law of 2006 ushered in a period that saw a proliferation of the establishment of private universities. Economic incentives, which include free land to build the university campus on and tax exemption on, inter alia, goods, materials, and imports that can be linked to the project for ten years (Investment Law, 2006), attracted wealthy businesspeople encouraging them to establish private universities. Businesspeople who, according to Rubin (2020), do not have educational quality as a priority. This profit-driven attitude to HE provision coupled with the lack of rules to regulate the private HEIs has resulted in sub-par quality of education that endures until today (“Education Reforms”, 2021; “Ministers”, 2021).

3.3.2 Inheriting ‘old Iraq’s’ HE system

As a semi-autonomous self-governing region, KRI was granted autonomy over the control and development of its HE system. Professor Ala-Aldeen, the Minister of the MHESR between 2009-2012 and who spearheaded an ambitious programme of HE reform described KRI’s inherited HE system from ‘old Iraq’ as “complicated and

outdated" (MHESR, 2010, p. 10). The UN economic sanctions on Iraq transformed the purpose of 'old Iraq's' HE system. Once considered one of the most prestigious HE systems in the region (Issa & Jamil, 2010), it became reduced to producing graduates for a closed economy. Consequently, its underfunded universities were transformed into waiting rooms for public sector employment rather than producing workers for a knowledge driven private sector. It is this transformed HE system that KRI inherited from 'old Iraq' with outdated infrastructure, curricula, and pedagogy, and a complicated and bureaucratic system of management. The report, *A Roadmap to Quality: Reforming the System of Higher Education and Scientific in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, outlines the reforms needed to update KRI's inherited HE system to begin producing "highly skilled professionals" (MHESR, 2010, p. 11).

The KRG and MHESR have attempted to make inroads in the improvement of HE in KRI. These improvements are outlined in the *Roadmap to Quality* report (MHESR, 2010) and include reforming teaching and implementing a quality assurance programme, developing curricula, building capacity through investing in people and infrastructure, and reforming university and administrative management systems. The scope of the reforms necessary to update KRI's HE system is indicative of the poor state of HE inherited from 'old Iraq'. However, these and the other reforms in the report are yet to be implemented successfully. This is due in part to the tenuous relationship between the KRG and the government in Baghdad, which fuels regular budgetary disputes between the two governments that causes the federal government to withhold KRI's share of the national budget. Despite being self-governing, the KRG continues to be reliant on its allocation of the national budget to pay its public sector salaries, subsidies, and to fund HE sector reforms. Therefore, the success of KRI's HE reforms is contingent upon its relationship with the federal government. KRI's public HEIs are

most effected by the KRG's tenuous relationship with the federal government because unlike their private counterparts, public HEIs are fully reliant on the KRG for funding. The inherited centralised and bureaucratic system that KRI's MHESR continues to use thwarts public HEIs efforts to improve their delivery of HE through managing and financing themselves independently.

3.3.3 Public and private HEIs & the MHESR

Today, there are eighteen public HEIs and seventeen private HEIs (Gov.KRD, 2023). Tuition at public HEIs is free, and the majority of students attend these institutions. Ahmad and Shah (2016) report that the average yearly household income is $4500 meaning that for the majority of households, paying for a private education is beyond their means when tuition fees normally begin at $2000 per year. The fees charged by private HEIs result in inequity on two fronts. First, students from wealthy families who attend private universities are able to buy their way into their choice of degree specialisation. Consequently, having greater control over the direction that their future selves will take unlike their poorer counterparts whose major at a public HEI is dictated by their GPA on the national exam. Moreover, since 2010 private HEIs are only permitted by the MHESR to open departments that are driven by labour market need (Ahmad, & Shah, 2016), which should work in favour of their students in the graduate labour market. Second, since 2010, when tighter regulations were put in place to govern private HEIs (Ahmad & Shah, 2016), the elite HEIs, and generally even the non-elite private HEIs, boast a better quality of education, learning environment, and overall experience than their public counterparts (Ahmad, 2019).

Public HEIs are fully (under)funded by the KRG. They are completely reliant on government funding for operations and maintenance and are centrally controlled by the

MHESR. Conversely, private HEIs, which do not receive public funding have greater freedom over their operations as long as their operations stay within the limits of the MHESR's regulations (Ahmad & Shah, 2016). The HEIs of the region can be divided into two tiers. The top tier consists of a small number of elite private HEIs, which are English medium. The second tier is made up of all the other non-elite private HEIs, which may or may not teach in English, and all of the public HEIs that teach in Kurdish (Jayid et al., 2021). Respondents in the Global Partners Governance study complained that in the private sector it was graduates from the top tier that were employers "top picks" (Jayid et al., 2021, p. 43). This illustrates the importance of the question of how public HEIs can increase the employability of their graduates and start producing "top picks" like their private counterparts.

3.3.4 Purpose of HE

When discussing the purpose of HE in KRI, it is beneficial to split the discussion into two time periods. That is to say, the purpose of HE pre-2014 and the purpose of HE post-2014. The year 2014, delivered concurrent financial disasters to the region, which caused the KRG to rethink and ultimately to renegade on its side of the social contract by freezing public sector hiring, which delivered a hard blow to thousands of graduates of public HEIs, who until then expected to transition into public sector employment after university.

The purpose of public HE prior to 2014 in KRI had been to serve as waiting rooms delaying entry into public sector employment (UNESCO, 2019). When students finished university and wanted to transition into their public sector role, they applied through the centralised placement system (UNODC, 2013) and waited to be placed in a public sector role (Maneshi, 2019). During 2012, which was in the period of KRI's

economic boom where the region had been likened to being the “next Dubai” (DeWeaver, 2015), the KRG placed 17,000 jobseekers including graduates into public sector roles. Despite this being a massive number, many graduates were left without being placed into a public sector position and were left feeling frustrated (“College Graduates Face Difficulties Finding Jobs”, n.d.). However, rather than applying for private sector jobs, many graduates prefer to wait “as long as needed” (Monteabaro & Atroshi, 2014, p.127) for a public sector position.

It was not until the KRG officially announced the hiring freeze in 2014, which directly impacted graduates and HEIs, that HEIs’ raison d’être changed. The KRG’s rhetoric on graduate employment became aligned with global employability discourses, which place the individual graduate as responsible for finding their own employment (in the private sector). HEIs were given a new purpose of equipping their students with the employability skills that had been reported as lacking in the RAND report published in 2014. The education that students had been receiving in public HEIs, Atrushi and Woodfield (2018) say, left them unable to compete in the private sector labour market, which demands different skills and attributes from employees than the public sector, including knowledge of a second language and technology skills (Monteabaro & Atroshi, 2014).

Increasingly, calls are being made by KRI’s President and Prime Minister for the region’s HEIs to begin producing hireable graduates for the private sector (“Education Reforms”, 2021; “Ministers”, 2021). A series of reports published by UNESCO (2019) focusing on the private sector labour market highlight that there is still a skills gap between what graduates possess and what employers want. Issa and Jamil (2010) describe HE provision in Iraq:

> The quality of education has deteriorated after the 1990s. Factors responsible for the decline in quality ... [include] low level of education financing, lack of minimum standards in the form of teaching-learning materials, … outdated curricula, and overcrowding. Moreover, staff … are poorly trained, … dependent on lecture with no emphasis on analysis, synthesis or other forms of knowledge application (p. 366).

Atrushi and Woodfield's (2018) results from their more recent study into the quality of HE provision in KRI reconfirms Issa and Jamil's (2010) findings despite there being a push within the last decade in KRI to reform HE. Therefore, improvements need to be implemented in the region's HE system to begin producing hireable graduates who are capable and willing to work in the private sector rather than wait for a public sector position.

3.3.5 Access into HE

Education in KRI is compulsory until grade nine, and children attend what is known as basic education. Before entering secondary education, students decide between an academic or vocational pathway. Most students opt for the academic route (Constant et al., 2014), and the majority of those on the academic route go on to apply for HE. To illustrate, in 2021, out of 63,000 high school graduates, 52,000 applied for university (Jangiz, 2021).

At the end of grade twelve, students take the national exams. The importance of this national exam in determining the direction of future lives of Kurdish students cannot be understated. It is the student's GPA from these exams that largely dictate what degree specialisation is studied if they attend a public HEI (Constant et al., 2014). Constant et al. (2014) explain how the HE placement system works. Students are given the opportunity to choose what degree specialisation they would like to study. Whether they are actually assigned to that programme of study, depends on their GPA. If their

score is insufficient, they are assigned to a specialisation that accepts their lower score, or they can apply to a private fee-paying HEI.

3.3.6 Internships

Historically, internships are done almost exclusively in the public sector, which arguably makes sense as 70 percent of KRI's working population are employed in the public sector, and, traditionally, publicly educated HE graduates were placed in public sector positions. However, with government discourse now officially encouraging private sector employment, the internship program should reflect this change. To meet this end, the internship program in KRI was undergoing a process of development and improvement spearheaded by the office of the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM), which involved focusing on the internships being done in the private sector. The now offline *KRG Internship Program* website published a long-term objective of the development of the internship program to "change cultural mindset about employment in the private sector" (KRG Internship Program, 2020). However, the *KRG Internship Program* website since April 2023 can no longer be found, and there is very little information available on the structure of the internship program (at least in English) available elsewhere. Therefore, the information presented below has been taken from the website of one of KRI's public HEIs and from my own personal experience.

In KRI, internships are a mandatory component of degree completion. They should be a minimum of 100 hours in length and are usually done over the summer break usually between the third and fourth years of undergraduate studies ("Student Internships", 2023). From my personal observations of how internships are organised, there is little structure to the programme with minimal communication with employers about their expected input into the programme. From informal conversations with

students, feedback is mixed. Some students report frustration at receiving no training or attention from employers while others report that employers fully supervise them.

3.3.7 Career development centres

The career development centres (CDCs) are now found in all public HEIs in KRI. They are an initiative of the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) and were established through a joint partnership of IREX and the MHESR in the early 2010s (IREX, 2021). The CDCs are not job centres but are centres that aim to develop the career skills of university students. The CDCs run training programmes and workshops equipping public university students with employability skills to try and bridge the skills gap that private sector employers report as lacking. One issue raised in Monteabaro and Atroshi's (2014) study done at the University of Duhok is that not all students benefit from the CDCs equally. They asked approximately 35 Humanities students and staff for the location of the CDC office, and nobody could successfully direct them to it, which they concede could be attributable to the relative newness of CDCs at the time of their research. However, I can offer some anecdotal support for Monteabaro and Atroshi's concerns over CDC access. In 2020, when I was collecting my data, I searched for the CDC office at the largest public HEI in KRI. I asked many students for directions using the Kurdish translation of CDC as well as the English, and nobody that I asked could help me.

3.3.8 Technical and vocational education and training

The MHESR offers two and four-year technical programmes in institutes and colleges, respectively, to high school students who graduate from the academic route but who scored the lowest GPAs on the grade 12 national exam (Constant et al., 2014). It is not a modest number of high school graduates who are enrolled in technical

institutes. In 2012, 30,000 students were enrolled in either two or four year HE TVET programmes (Constant et al., 2014). An issue highlighted in the RAND TVET report (Constant et al., 2014) is that there are no national vocational assessments. Meaning that there is no minimum standard level of competency being assessed to be awarded a diploma for not an insubstantial number of graduates. For employers to hire graduates from technical institutes, they need assurance of their competencies, which is not being provided.

The RAND TVET report (Constant et al., 2014) also highlights how there is no institutionalised collaboration between the HE TVET programmes and private sector employers, which the authors say is unusual when compared to TVET programmes in most other countries. This lack of collaboration is also reported in the later UNESCO report with only small percentages of employers in each sector saying that they have a relationship with HE TVET providers.

The RAND TVET report (Constant et al., 2014) also says that private sector employers report that graduates from HE TVET programmes lack English language and computer skills and do not have enough practical experience to be employed. A finding that is echoed in the UNESCO report. Employers' unwillingness to hire TVET graduates is evident in the RAND TVET report (Constant et al., 2014), which says that only 10 to 20 percent of TVET graduates are employed within six months of graduating. Moreover, the UNESCO report says that there is no follow-up of TVET graduates to monitor if they find jobs or whether they meet employers' expectations.

The RAND TVET (Constant et al., 2014) and UNESCO reports outline the challenges facing the TVET programme offered by the MHESR. First, none of the HE TVET programmes have any on-the-job training. Like their academic-route

counterparts, students in TVET programmes are only required to do a two-month internship in their summer break, which "in practice … is poorly implemented and relatively un-supervised and un-monitored and neither employers nor learners find it useful" (UNESCO, 2019, p. 12). Second, while on paper the language of instruction is English, in practice teaching is in Kurdish because of the lack of proficiency in English for both the instructors and students. Third, the curricula was reported in 2014 as being 10-20 years outdated and not aligned with labour market needs (Constant et al., 2014).

Culturally, in KRI, TVET is not as valued as the academic route. Families pressure their children to study for the profession that will bring them the highest status that their grades can get them entry with no regard of their enthusiasm or interest for the profession or whether there are enough available jobs (UNESCO, 2019). Foster (1965) suggests that society's devaluation of TVET could be attributed to the nature of employment in rentier economies, like KRI. The Cambridge dictionary's definition of vocational is "providing skills and education that prepare you for a job" (Vocational, 2023). Historically, in KRI the public sector was, and indeed still is, the main employer, and those with university degrees get a higher return for their efforts. Therefore, following Foster's reasoning, an academic degree can be considered as the equivalent of a vocational qualification as it prepares its holder with the skills and education required to be employed in the public sector. If Foster is correct, for TVET to become a more attractive option in KRI, society's preference for public sector employment has to be challenged and transformed.

3.3.9 Rote learning and ideology of education

Rote learning and an unquestioning attitude towards knowledge characterises the public education system in KRI (Darweish & Mohammed, 2018). Rote learning is not

particular to this region's classrooms; it is endemic throughout the Middle East. For rentier states, which buy complicity from their citizens through social contracts (Herb & Lynch, 2019), rote learning is a useful tool as it instils an unquestioning and passive attitude towards knowledge and towards the authority who bestows this knowledge on them, which is ideal for upholding the status quo and citizens' quiescence towards it.

In Freirean (1970/2014) terms, rote learning, which he calls the banking method, cultivates passivity in citizens through domesticating learners by teaching them to adapt to their reality rather than critically question it. Muasher and Brown (n.d.) surmise that the education systems across the Middle East are not intended to cultivate and develop an engaged citizenry. That is to say that education is intended to uphold the status quo by continuing with outmoded pedagogical instruction such as rote learning that teaches passivity. Rote learning focuses on lower-order cognitive skills only and neglects higher-order cognitive skills such as critical analysis and evaluation (What is rote learning?, 2020). Higher-order skills can develop an engaged citizenry and are, coincidentally, in demand by private sector employers but also have the potential to threaten the ruling group's hold on power.

A primary use of education is to indoctrinate the masses with the ruling group's values and ideology and to ultimately oppress them (Freire, 1970/2014). KRI inherited its education system from "old-Iraq" (MHESR, 2010, p.10). Until 2003, education was used by Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath regime as a tool of the Arabisation policy and to commit linguicide against the Kurdish language in Iraq (Salih, 2019). Education under the Ba'ath regime was used to oppress the Kurds, yet until now, the same learning and teaching methods are still being used in KRI. The content of the textbooks have changed, for example, Darweish and Mohammed (2018) outline how history textbooks now focus

on events that impacted the Kurdish historical timeline and the persecution of the Kurds at the hands of Arabs. However, and most importantly, the approaches to learning knowledge have not changed. The teacher remains the authority in the classroom, and their role is to ensure that through rote learning knowledge is memorised to be later regurgitated in a multiple-choice exam.

In a MoP report (2013), the section on education begins with:

> The turbulent events of history prevented many of our older residents from achieving their educational potential. However, with the creation of our Region and the new powers of the KRG, the opportunity to educate our younger generations has arrived (p. 9).

In the same report, the vision for KRI's education system is given, "An educational system that equips our people to achieve their aspirations and support democratic values, economic development, and societal welfare" (MoP, 2013, p. 9). The will to educate is evident; however, the means with which to educate are, to quote Maneshi (2019) once more, "exceptionally outdated" (p. 3). For the KRG to grasp the opportunity to provide a transformative education that supports "people to achieve their aspirations", the system needs updating. Rote learning, or the banking method, maintains a "culture of silence" (Freire, 1970/2014, p. 26) among society on issues that impact them negatively. This is to say that rote learning promotes education as a socially reproductive tool. It is not the act of memorisation that accompanies rote learning that is anathema to education being socially transformative but rather the philosophy that underscores the banking method of education. The idea that knowledge can be learned through rote memorisation without having to discover it, construct it, question it, analyse it, and evaluate it and then be free to discard it after this rigorous process. Darweish and Mohammed's (2018) study demonstrates that through using rote learning, knowledge of Kurdish history is 'successfully' acquired by students without

ever having to discover, analyse, and evaluate different perspectives surrounding historical events that have shaped Kurdish history and society. To further press this point, how can education "support democratic values" (MoP, 2013, p. 9) if learners have not analysed and evaluated what democracy is in relation to their own beliefs and the beliefs of others?

3.3.10 Teaching and learning today

Two notable academic studies on KRI's education system are Darweish and Mohammed's (2018), which focuses on primary grades and Atrushi and Woodfield's (2018), which focuses on HE. Both studies taken together provide a rather negative picture of the quality of education in KRI.

Darweish and Mohammed's (2018) article outlines how the history curriculum in public schools in KRI is delivered to students as knowledge that represents the one truth. In learning about history as one truth, students learn history from only one perspective. Students are taught to "learn and internalise the principle of submission …. to teachers …. and course content" (Darweish & Mohammed, 2018, p. 56) without questioning or analysing the content. In the fifth-year textbooks, Darweish and Mohammed report that 54 out of the 55 questions are recall and repeat questions with no activities that encourage analytical evaluation. This type of questioning maintains Freire's (1970/2014) duality that exists in Gannon's (2020) classrooms of death. The textbook asks a question for which there is one right answer that is found in the text or can be provided by the teacher. There is no space in this classroom for inquisitive knowledge seekers. Instead, learners are taught to submissively accept what they read in their textbooks and what they are told by their teacher. Darweish and Mohammed explain that alternative perspectives are not considered in the textbooks or discussed

by teachers. With only one perspective of history, or indeed any subject, being taught, there is no space for discussion and critical questioning. And the students being dutiful in their submission towards the one truth, remain ignorant to wider issues and ultimately of their oppression (Freire, 1970/2014).

Darweish and Mohammed's (2018) study highlights how rote learning is the norm in public schools in KRI with teacher-participants admitting "that they do not encourage critical perspectives" (p. 59) in their classrooms. During classroom observations, Darweish and Mohammed observed that teachers did not stray from the textbook. The teachers explained that if they did include extra material that is not in the textbook, students complained. The classroom dynamics are as Freire (1970/2014) describes when the banking method is used and would fulfil the criteria to be labelled by Gannon (2020) as classrooms of death. A good teacher is one who transfers a large amount of knowledge accurately to their students, and a good student is one who can memorise accurately the knowledge given to them. This is despite a change in education policy in 2009 that encourages teachers to use student-centred approaches to try and engage their learners. However, as classes are crowded with many schools operating in shifts (Vernez et al., 2016), abandoning the use of rote learning may be impractical.

These conditions noted in the school system do not magically disappear in HE. Atrushi and Woodfield's (2018) research on the quality of HE in KRI shares many similarities with Darweish and Mohammed's (2018) research of the lower grades. Atrushi and Woodfield surveyed academic staff and university leaders from four of the region's public HEIs. When questioned about student engagement in classes, only 6.5 percent responded that they felt students 'were engaged enough' with one third of

respondents blaming the teaching staff for not being capable to engage their students in learning.

Individuals in KRI's leadership have begun making public calls for the region's HEIs to produce graduates that can successfully find work in the private sector ("Education Reforms", 2021; "Ministers", 2021). For the region's HEIs to answer the calls of KRI's leadership and become producers of graduates employable in the private sector, a great deal of improvement is going to be necessary. Atrushi and Woodfield (2018) say the skills needed by graduates for public and private sector employment are dissimilar, and the region's public HEIs are poorly equipped to make the transition to produce graduates who can be perceived as employable by the private sector. More than half of their respondents reported that their academic disciplines do not "fulfil employers' current skills needs enough/at all" (Atrushi & Woodfield, 2018, p. 656). A view that is upheld by the current Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Aram Mohammed, who said, "This [HE] system needs to change … [it does not] meet our present-day needs" (Jangiz, 2021, para. 1-3).

3.3.11 Socially reproductive education

In the 1970s, the political parties that dominate the modern day KRG were founded on the ideal of attaining self-determination for the Kurds from their oppressors (Hakeem, 2017). Viewed through a Bourdieuian and Freirean lens, today the two mainstream political parties, the KDP and PUK, which control the Ministry of Education (MoE) and MHESR, respectively, have taken on the role of the oppressors and use their oppression to silence and domesticate the oppressed (their supporters) to conform to the status quo (Freire, 1970/2014). The oil rents that the political parties control provide the material means whereas education and rote learning, which is symbolically

violent (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990), provides the intellectual means for the domestication of the oppressed. Society, through the material and intellectual means, internalises the disposition of dependency on the KRG and ultimately becomes domesticated. As the individual and collective together inform the habitus (Calhoun, 2000), it is like individuals act as one collective, and it appears as if society's collective voice is silenced in questioning their oppression. Freire (1970/2014) explains that once a pattern of oppression has been established, it foments behaviour from both the oppressors and oppressed to continue in this pattern and arouses fatalist attitudes among the latter that they are unable to change their situation and so remain silent. Freire continues to caution that this fatalist attitude is mistakenly attributed as an inherent characteristic of the oppressed when it is actually a product of their lived experience of living under oppression. Freire explains that the oppressed may accept, fatalistically, that what happens to them is the will of God, but it is actually by the manufacture of the oppressors, which in modern-day KRI are the political parties. Freire argues that to break this cycle of domestication, oppression, and fatalism, a critical pedagogy must be adopted.

3.3.12 Summary

Education under Saddam Hussein was weaponised against the Kurds (Faris, 2015; Salih, 2019), yet the same teaching method, rote learning, is used in KRI's public education system. The KDP and PUK, who in the last decades of the twentieth century fought for KRI's liberation are now arguably its oppressors. Viewed through a Bourdieuian and Freirean lens, rote learning, as adopted in KRI's classrooms, produces dependent and domesticated citizens who remain unaware of their oppression and of their ability to transform their reality or their dependency on public sector employment.

Public education in KRI at all levels is outdated and poor quality (Atrushi & Woodfield, 2018; Darweish & Mohammed, 2018; Maneshi, 2019). At the HE level, two tiers of quality have been established. At the top level, there are a small number of elite English-medium HEIs that provide better quality and market-oriented (Jayid et al., 2021) education, but these serve only a very small number of the university-age demographic. The remainder of the private HEIs and the public HEIs make up the second tier. Public HEIs' do not provide an education that is private sector labour market oriented, which can be explained by their original purpose which was to act as waiting rooms for public sector employment. The new purpose for public HEIs is to produce hireable graduates for the private sector. To this end, the DPM started to develop the internship programme to make it more private sector oriented, and CDCs have been established in all public HEIs by IREX and the MHESR.

The MHESR also oversees the provision of technical degrees. Much like their academic counterparts, the technical institutes lack quality. The RAND TVET report (Constant et al., 2014) says that there are no national standardised vocational qualifications to assure employers of graduates' competencies. Moreover, there is no formal collaboration between the technical institutes and industry, yet informal communication has yielded negative employer opinions about the quality of graduates from the technical institutes and citing a lack of English and computer skills as major problems (UNESCO, 2019). There is no on-the-job training built into these four-year degrees, and students are only required to complete a two-month internship. The poor quality of the technical education provided by the MHESR is reflected in the percentage of graduates who find work within six months of graduation, which is placed between 10 to 20 percent in the RAND TVET report (Constant et al., 2014).

3.4 Sociocultural factors

In this section, two sociocultural factors, wasta and collectivism, are presented and discussed that impact graduate employability.

3.4.1 Wasta

In KRI, there is a sociocultural phenomenon known as wasta. In Western countries the attributes of wasta would be associated with corruption; however, in the Middle East, wasta as a part of daily life is not necessarily associated with criminality (Ramady, 2016). Wasta is an Arabic word that is commonly and loosely translated into English to mean connections. This translation does not do justice to this historic custom that is interwoven into the fabric and sociocultural histories of Middle Eastern societies (Romano, 2015), and which governs daily interactions and business transactions ranging from sealing multimillion dollar business partnerships to the mundane act of the cancelling of speeding tickets, and which has been described as an "essential" (Baranik, Gorman, & Wright, 2021, p. 4) component in gaining employment. Monteabaro and Atroshi's (2014) research, which touches on wasta, offers a translation of wasta into English that has greater congruency with its Arabic meaning, which is "a social currency of favours" (p. 138).

3.4.1.1 Is it all just wasta?

In KRI, wasta is a commonly used (and abused) form of social capital (Edwards & Rwanduzy, 2018) where the exchange of favours is increasingly required to successfully gain employment. So much so, that wasta has been nicknamed "Vitamin W" (Edwards & Rwanduzy, 2018, para. 10). In KRI's private sector, a graduate who has good credentials and possesses the soft skills as demanded by the employer but who does not have wasta is rejected in favour of an individual who has neither the required credentials nor soft

skills demanded by the employer for the position but who does have wasta (Edwards & Rwanduzy, 2018; Hutchings and Weir, 2006; Mohamed & Hamdy, 2008).

When wasta is used to secure employment, there is often a mismatch between the individual and the requirements of the job description (Ramady, 2016). That is to say that the individual who gets the job does not necessarily have the knowledge, capabilities, or competence to do it well. Worryingly, studies done on wasta across the Middle East show that the prevalence of wasta is by no means diminishing. In Tlaiss and Kauser's (2011) study on the perceptions of wasta across the Middle East region, 92 percent of respondents said that wasta is more important than qualifications and work experience for recruitment and promotion. Ramady (2016) says that good students across the Middle East fear that without using wasta, their careers will hit a "glass ceiling" (p. x). Most recently, Baranik et al.'s (2021) findings support earlier research and conclude that access to wasta is crucial for career success.

There is a dearth of academic research (in English) that focuses on the prevalence of the use of wasta to gain employment in KRI. However, what can be established are factors that fuel the perceived need to use wasta by graduates to secure employment. Lackner (2016) explains that during periods of high unemployment, wasta is looked upon as a necessary fact of daily life to be able to secure a scarce resource, a job. The unemployment rate, which stood at more than 15 percent in 2018 for those holding a high school diploma or higher (KRSO, 2018), creates an ideal hotbed for the use of wasta to flourish. In 2013, 25 percent of young people in Iraq believed that their lack of connections was the biggest obstacle to finding a job (World Bank, 2013). Contrast this to the RAND report that says that employers believe that the biggest obstacle to hiring more local graduates is their lack of skills. Whose perception of reality

is closest to the truth? Are young people shirking their responsibilities towards their employability by complaining about a lack of wasta? Or are employers masking bias hiring practices (Boliver, 2017), this is to say, their use of wasta, by complaining that local graduates lack skills?

In summary, wasta is a part of the collective narrative (Brandstaetter, Bamber, & Weir, 2016) of KRI's society, which is to say in Bourdieuian (2002) terms that it is a part of society's habitus. Investment in education and the economy should equate to better employability. However, wasta, a form of social capital, works against this hypothesis (Karolak, 2016) as the possession of qualifications, skills, and experience are subordinated to the possession of wasta.

3.4.2 Collectivism

In Middle East societies characterised by collectivism (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) the family is the most essential social unit with the close familial relationships making up the fabric of the social world. The Middle Eastern family is a tightly bound cohesive structure in which its members rely on each other unswervingly for support in exchange for loyalty and a commitment to pursuing the course of action that best benefits the family over the individual (Hassan, 2015; Hofstede et al., 2010). In KRI, this collectivist ideal of putting what is best for the family first can explain the level of parental interference in determining what their children study at university as well as what they go on to do after graduation as their preoccupation is not with what is best for the individual but what is best for the family.

Monteabaro and Atroshi's (2014) study on graduates from the city of Duhok reveal how graduates feel pressured by their families to get a public sector job and how families are prepared to support their children for as long as necessary. One reason

given for this, for males at least, by participants in Monteabaro and Atroshi's study is to better their marriage prospects. Some participants said that some of the families of the brides forbid their daughters to marry a man who does not have a government job. The participants indicated that the security attached with a public sector job is what pushes families to have a strong preference for it over working in the private sector. Public sector employment comes with additional benefits, such as land grants, pensions, and paid holidays that are generally unheard of in the private sector. In addition, from a cultural viewpoint, those who work in the public sector are held in higher regard and have a higher standing in society than those who do not (MERI, 2016). The prospects of better employment benefits and a higher social standing in the community that accompany public sector employment are enough for families to provide refuge for their unemployed children for as long as it takes to be given a public sector position.

3.4.3 Summary

The use of wasta is beyond prevalent in KRI. It is used to aid the completion of mundane daily tasks as well as to secure lucrative business deals, so it is unsurprising that wasta is used by graduates to find employment, especially considering the scarcity of jobs in KRI. A question arises as to whether graduates lack skills as per the RAND and UNESCO reports or whether graduates lack wasta.

Kurdish society is still inherently collectivist in nature with the family still being the primary social unit. Loyalty given to the family is rewarded by the social unit providing a welfare net for unemployed graduates. Families would rather their children hold out for public sector employment that brings a higher status to the graduate and by extension to their family.

3.5 Summary

The KRG chose to continue with the system of rentier governance, which has nurtured a habitus within society that is characterised by dependency on the KRG and/or political parties. The largest employer in the region remains the public sector despite the public sector's hiring freeze. This is partly attributable to the private sector being in a weak state and unable to employ the numbers needed. The private sector is an oligopoly and is at the mercy of the corrupt practices of the elite families who have monopolised it. Consequently, investment and the subsequent creation of jobs is stifled. Wasta, a form of social capital, is used to secure employment, thereby subordinating meritocracy to elitism.

The education system inherited from 'old Iraq' is outdated, and the majority of the region's HEIs are not capable of producing hireable graduates at present. This is partly attributable to the purpose of public HEIs that until 2014 had been to act as waiting rooms for public sector employment. The Investment Law of 2006 is also partly attributable as it offers economic incentives to businesspeople, who do not necessarily have any idea about HE, to open HEIs in the region. There are no statistics for the graduate employment rate for the academic programmes, but the RAND TVET report (Constant et al., 2014) says that only 10 to 20 percent of graduates from the technical programmes find employment within six months of graduating. These statistics cast a poor reflection over the quality of HE provision in KRI which is managed by the MHESR.

KRI is a collectivist society that on the sociocultural level is governed by the use of wasta. Wasta, much like Bourdieu's social capital, is a social network of connections and, an individual's wasta can be measured as the total sum of all who are in their network of connections. The permanence of wasta in KRI's society's habitus is almost

unquestionable so must factor in any discussion about graduate employability in the region. Below the research questions are presented.

3.6 Research questions

1. Why are some graduates perceived as less employable than other graduates or other jobseekers in the private sector?
2. Which stakeholder(s) (the government, government ministries, HEIs, and private employers) is/are perceived as responsible for graduate employability and why?
3. How do stakeholders' policies, practices, and actions affect the employability of graduates in KRI?
4. How can HEIs improve their students' employability throughout their undergraduate programmes of study?

Chapter 4 Research methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research methodology used for this study. It begins with my ontological and epistemological position before discussing my rationale for the research design. Then it covers the pragmatic aspects of the data collection and analysis. Before finishing with my reflections on the process of collecting and analysing the data and of the effects of my outsider-insider status on the study. This chapter ends with a discussion of the ethical considerations as well as reflecting on the study's validity and reliability.

4.2 Ontology and epistemology

I have an interpretative ontology, and at the core of my belief is that reality is socially constructed and shaped by our experiences, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds. There is not one objective reality to be studied and measured, instead individuals all subjectively and socially construct their own reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Befitting my ontological belief is that research should seek to understand the meanings and interpretations that people give to their experiences and actions (Scotland, 2012), not to test hypotheses or to make predictions. It is important to also keep in mind that there can be multiple interpretations of experiences and social phenomena (Moses & Knutsen, 2007). As there are multiple interpretations of social phenomena, this leads to the important questions of what counts as knowledge and how do we create it?

Social constructivism, which is concerned with the disciplines of creating knowledge (Richardson, 2003), as an epistemology provides the means for creating knowledge within an interpretative ontology. Constructivism asserts that knowledge cannot be simply discovered or passed from person to person but that it must be

actively constructed and interpreted through social and cultural interactions by those involved (Jonassen, 1991). Participants in a study must be given voice and time to present their own knowledge on the issue that impacts their lives in their context (Barillaro, Lane-Metz, Perran, & Stokes, n.d.). The inherent subjectivity that is a part of constructivism calls for the constructivist researcher to be in constant dialogue with themselves to consider the "ethical, truth and political implications of his research and writing" (Soobrayan, 2003, p. 107). This constant dialogue with oneself, or reflexivity, is an important factor of constructivism. Reflexivity must be engaged with by the researcher to guard against their bias and perceptions superimposing on the participants' experiences and voices and quietening the participants' perspectives of reality. Through engaging in reflexivity, a researcher can gain a more complete understanding of the social phenomena being studied.

4.3 Research methodology

Yin (2009) says that a case study should be employed as a strategy to explore social phenomena in its actual social context, which is what my study aims to do. To explore the issue of graduate employability within the lived realities of its stakeholders in KRI. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) say that the social world can only be understood from those who are participating in it. This means that if I am to explore and understand the social phenomenon of graduate employability in KRI, that my research must include the stakeholders who are actively involved. Moreover, Creswell (2013) says that to understand individuals' social worlds they must be looked at from their viewpoint as well as situating them into the lived historical and social context. A case study provides the historical and social context of the social phenomenon being studied as well as interpreting multiple participants' perspectives of it. A case study approach

allows the researcher to explore the how and why, and enables complex, competing, and contradictory perspectives to be heard (Rittenhofer, 2015).

This qualitative research is a single exploratory reflexive case study of the social phenomenon of graduate employability in KRI, which represents the 'case' (Yin, 2017). As Yin (2017) says, a case cannot be an abstract notion but should ideally be "a real-world phenomenon that has some concrete manifestation" (Chapter 2: Design, The "case", para. 11). The geographical boundary is KRI, and the temporal boundary is from 2015 to 2022, which represents the year after the public sector hiring freeze was introduced to the end of the data collection. The case does not focus on individual factors that contribute to graduate employability but examines institutional and structural factors that impact on graduate employability, so the units of analysis include HEIs, government ministries, private sector employers, and training providers. The data were collected from within Erbil Governate, but the results are applicable to all governates within KRI as the institutional and structural factors that this study focuses on apply to all KRI not just Erbil Governate.

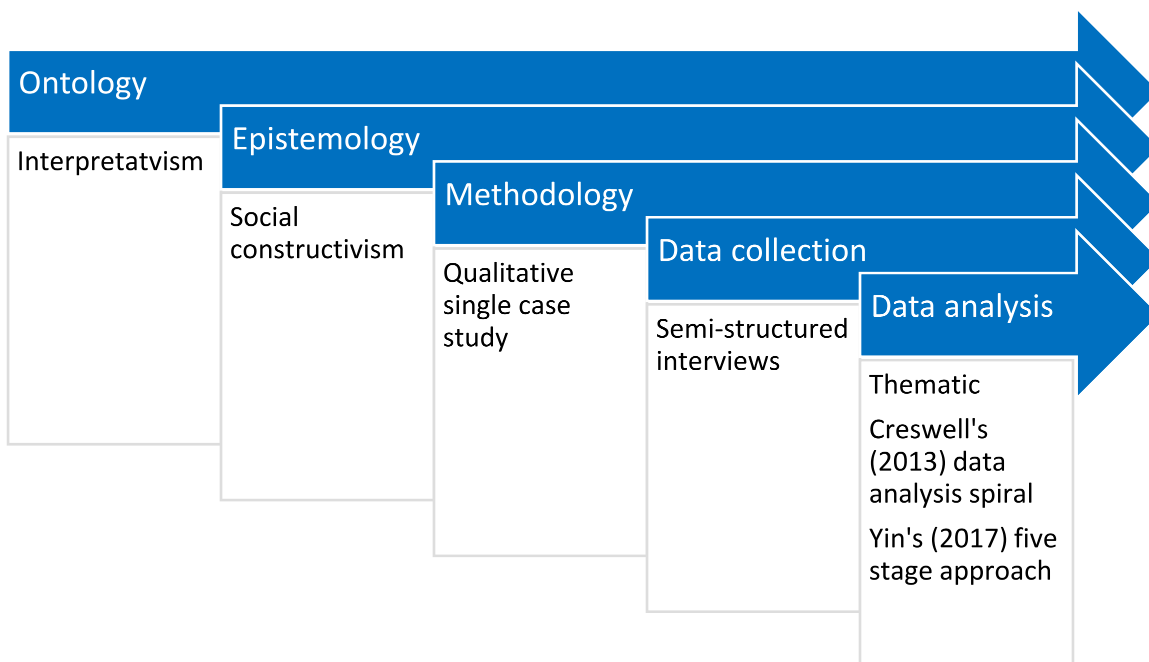
The point of this case study is not to test hypotheses or create grand theories (Priya, 2020) but to provide a holistic picture of the social phenomena from multiple stakeholders' perspectives, namely private sector employers, ministry officials, HE academic and administrative staff, and training providers. Using the participants' responses, themes on graduate employability are woven together within a framework of Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 2002) theories of habitus and capital and Freire's (1970/2014) ideology of critical pedagogy, to create a picture of graduate employability that identifies areas and new research questions for subsequent studies (Priya, 2020). As I have chosen to explore a social phenomenon in its lived context and from the perspectives of the lived realities of its stakeholders, it is important that I remain open

to the participants' voices and to not limit my interpretation of the data by allowing my bias to encroach into the data. To guard against this, reflexivity and imagination must be employed. Andrews (2012) says that a researcher's imagination is a valuable tool in research as it dissuades the researcher from narrowing their vision and allowing their bias to guide their interpretation and reflections. Moreover, Brewer (1994) cautions researchers not to be judgemental of others' cultures, instead researchers should allow themselves to be transported into the others' worlds (Pellico and Chinn, 2007) whilst remaining reflexive.

Figure 4.1 below is an overview of the research design and includes the ontology, epistemology, methodology, data collection, and analysis. The first three phases have been discussed above. The data collection and analysis are discussed in detail below.

Figure 4.1

Overview of the research design



4.4 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data as they provide an opportunity for both the researcher and respondent to flexibly interact with one another and give voice to all respondents to elicit more valuable and useful data (Burawoy, 1998). In qualitative research, it is the job of the researcher to attempt to understand the phenomenon under study from the viewpoints of the participants (Kvale, 1996) for which semi-structured interviews are appropriate for. The purpose of this case study is to provide a holistic picture of graduate employability in KRI, which is being undertaken by an outsider, and who cannot presume to have a deep enough understanding of the complexities of the 'case' to undertake a standardised survey of the stakeholders' perceptions of the research issue. Therefore, qualitative semi-structured interviews have greater relevance for the purpose of the boundaries and context of this study.

Kvale (1996) says that researchers can approach interviews from two perspectives. As metaphorically being either a miner or a traveller. I adopted the traveller metaphor perspective to the best of my novice interviewer ability. As a 'traveller' interviewer, I encouraged my participants to join me on a metaphorical journey exploring graduate employability through sharing their experiences with me through dialogue. A dialogue that was guided by a framework of questions (see Appendix I). As the participants shared their experiences and perspectives with me, I flexibly rearranged and adapted the questions (Dearnley, 2005) to encourage a flowing dialogue between myself and the participant (Whiting, 2008).

The interview questions are a mix of attitudinal and behavioural questions (Lassen, 2021) that aim to uncover both the participants' beliefs about graduate employability and also their practices or their organisation's practices. The questions

are open-ended (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016) and also quite repetitive. This was done purposefully to encourage the participants to speak at length on the topic multiple times. The interview questions do not address the research questions in a linear fashion but instead weave a meandering path between them. Probing follow-up questions follow many of the interview questions to help me extract more detailed responses from the participants (Knott, Rao, Summers, &Teeger, 2022).

Interview questions should not be written ambiguously or in a leading fashion. Rather, they should be written succinctly, be clearly understood, and be piloted before data collection begins (Kallio et al., 2016). This was particularly important in this study as for many of the participants, English is not their first language. To ensure that the questions were clear, understandable, free from bias, and would yield useful data, I piloted the questions on two critical friends who are from KRI, and for who English is a second language. Based on the feedback from my two critical friends, I re-worded three questions to make them more direct. Following this, my primary supervisor, at that time, reviewed the questions and checked my interview protocol and then gave me the go ahead to begin collecting the data.

The interviews were done over an extended period of time between 2020 and 2022. This was due in a large part to the lockdowns put into place because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted the University of Liverpool (UoL) to halt face-to-face interviews. This was problematic for my data collection as some participants were reluctant to be interviewed online or were only contactable by visiting them in person. For this reason, the interview period was drawn out with interviews of ministry officials only finally being done in 2021 and 2022.

4.5 Participant sample and size

The sample of participants reflects the needs of the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which focus on institutional and structural factors that impact on graduate employability in KRI and the pragmatics of who I could gain access to. I identified relevant stakeholders that are knowledgeable about institutional and structural factors to include private sector employers, ministry officials, HE academic practitioners and/or administrative staff, and training providers. Moreover, it is vital that the sample of participants are able to produce reliable data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All the study's participants (see Table 4.1) are knowledgeable about graduate employability. Those participants who represent private employers are all knowledgeable of their organisation's hiring procedures or are responsible for hiring within their organisation, and, importantly, their organisation hires graduate-level labour. The ministry officials and consultant, HE staff, and training providers all have extensive knowledge of the labour market, the concept of graduate employability, and of HE provision in KRI.

As this is a qualitative case study, the sample size is relatively small with a total of 18 participants (see Table 4.1) that represent four separate stakeholders. Miles and Huberman (1994) remind researchers that a sample does not only include people, "but also settings, events, and processes" (p. 41). The choices that I made with regards to the sample size is congruent with the needs of the research questions and enabled the saturation point to be reached, whereby no new data were gathered in the interviews (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). The aim of this study is to form a holistic picture of graduate employability in KRI; therefore, having a smaller sample that "illustrate[s] underlying basic problems seem[s] better than a large number of vague and muddied cases [that are] hard to interpret" (Meyer & Mayrhofer, 2022, p. 275).

Table 4.1

The study's participants

Name (pseudonym)	Stakeholder type	Sector/job role
Alan	Government ministry	MHESR
Bilal	Government ministry	MHESR
Carol	Private sector employer	NGO
Chad	Private sector employer	Oil and gas
Dara	Training provider	-
Dindar	HE (public)	Academic practitioner; Director
Elie	Private sector employer	Hospitality
Gohdar	Government ministry	MHESR
Jawan	Training provider	-
Jalil	HE (public)	Academic practitioner; Head of Department (HoD)
Kamal	HE (private)	Administrator; Director
Kara	HE (private)	Administrator
Louie	Private sector employer	Oil and gas (service)
Rachel	Private sector employer	Education
Rahand	Government ministry	MHESR
Raman	Government ministry	MoP
Safa	HE (public)	Academic practitioner
William	Government ministry	Consultant

Note. The study's participants (n=18) given in alphabetical order with their pseudonym, stakeholder type, their sector and/or job role.

Moreover, Meyer and Mayrhofer (2022) advise that sampling as a part of the qualitative research process is constrained and/or enabled by the social forces that the research is being done in. As an outsider researcher with limited professional contacts at the time of the data collection, the sample that I was able to recruit (see section 4.6) was also impacted by the pragmatics of who I, an outsider, could I get access to.

Marshall et al. (2013) recommend that past case studies be consulted to review their sample size; however, for KRI I could not find any similar case studies for comparison. The RAND and UNESCO labour reports include qualitative interviews, but these studies were conducted by teams of professional researchers and financed by the KRG and United Nations (UN), respectively, and so arguably are not comparable to my study in terms of scope and sample size. The feasibility of managing the data gathered from the sample is also important (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As an independent, novice, and outsider researcher, the total number of participants, 18, has been challenging yet manageable for me in terms of gaining access to and handling the data produced.

4.6 Sampling technique and participant recruitment

I engaged with the principle of feasibility (Meyer & Mayrhofer, 2022) when deciding what sampling techniques to use in this study. The principle of feasibility considers the availability and accessibility of participants, which as an outsider researcher with limited contacts was especially relevant to my situation. I employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to recruit the participants for the interviews. Punch (2005) says that purposive sampling is undertaken with a clear view of who you would like to participate whereas snowball sampling, Cargan (2007) says, is where interested parties are identified through a network of individuals who guide the researcher towards individuals who may be interested in participating. Difficulty in recruiting participants was due in part to my outsider status, the lack of up-to-date information available online in KRI, the COVID-19 pandemic, and for some individuals that I approached and was refused by, I speculate that they had a distrust of the premise of my research and perhaps even of myself. Table 4.1 outlines the pseudonyms and type of stakeholder each participant is connected to.

4.6.1 Private sector employers

I wanted to include a cross-section of industries, including education, NGO, oil and gas, hospitality, construction, and ICT in this study, so I carried out online searches of large private sector organisations in Erbil that represent these sectors. Once I had identified who I thought was in charge of recruitment, I emailed them using the email addresses found on their organisation's websites. However, a significant number of large organisations in Erbil do not have websites and not all of those that do maintain them with up-to-date information. From this first round of emails that I sent, I got many emails bouncing back to me saying the email address is either wrong or the inbox is full and for the ones that were sent successfully, I got zero replies. After this, I decided to try and recruit through my network of friends. I essentially asked my friends to become my wasta and connect me with private sector employers, and I had considerable success. I organised a series of in-person interviews via email correspondence after getting their signed consent but then in March 2020, the KRG announced a full lockdown. All of the people I had intended to interview went into lockdown and none returned any of my emails even after the lockdown was lifted, so I found myself back at square one.

On 28th May 2020, I decided to widen my network of friends and to post on my Facebook page that I was searching for individuals in charge of recruitment at private sector organisations to participate in my research (Vicky Whiteside, 2020, May 28, Friends in Erbil, I'm searching for companies/organisations to participate in my doctoral research.). As a consequence of this post, several friends put me in touch with employers that I eventually went on to interview but not with total success. One local employer, the CEO of his company, baulked at my request to record our interview and would not even let me takes notes of our discussion even though this individual had agreed to participate in this study and had been fully informed of its purpose and who I

was. The information that they shared with me is not a part of the data set, and the participant is not included in the sample. It was not until I wrote the section, *Political Economy: Corruption*, in chapter three (section later removed from the thesis) that I fully comprehended the CEO's distrust of my research topic.

Table 4.2

Private sector employer participants

Name (pseudonym)	Region from	Sector (in KRI)	Characteristics of organisation in KRI
Carol	Europe	NGO	International, large
Chad	Europe	Oil and gas	Local, large
Elie	Middle East	Hospitality	International, large
Louie	North America	Oil and gas (service)	Local, size fluctuates from small to large
Rachel	North America	Education	Local, large

Note. Private sector employer participants (n=5) with pseudonyms given in alphabetical order, with region from, and their organisations' sector and characteristics. (The size of the company follows the categories given in the RAND report where a small company has between five to 19 employees; medium has 20 to 99 employees; and large has 100 or more employees.)

In total, five individuals (see Table 4.2) were interviewed representing four of the sectors that I had hoped to include in this study. None of the participants who represent private sector employers are from KRI, which was not intentional. They are from the Middle East, Europe, and North America.

4.6.2 Ministry officials

Through the RAND report, I had identified two key ministries that should be included in the sample, the MHESR and MoP. The websites of the KRG's various ministries are not kept up to date, and I faced similar problems in recruiting ministry

officials through email using purposeful sampling as I did with private sector employers. Moreover, throughout 2020, KRI went in and out of lockdowns with public sector employees told to stay at home, so visiting the ministries was not possible.

Table 4.3

Ministry officials and consultant participants

Name (pseudonym)	Ministry	Number of times interviewed
Alan	MHESR	2
Bilal	MHESR	1
Gohdar	MHESR	1
Rahand	MHESR	1
Raman	MoP	1
William	-	2

Note. Ministry officials' (n=5) and consultant's (n=1) pseudonyms given in alphabetical order, with ministry name and number of times interviewed.

Through perseverance and some luck, I eventually gained access to two individuals in both of the ministries as well as a consultant to one other ministry. This third ministry will remain unnamed as naming it may be sufficient enough to risk the participant being identified. In 2022, I joined a writing workshop for emerging academics writing about Kurdish culture and society. My mentor on this programme introduced me to one official at the MHESR, who in turn, introduced me to two others. I conducted interviews with all three of these officials in the first half of 2022 to establish data saturation. In total, five ministry officials and one consultant were interviewed (see Table 4.3).

4.6.3 HE academic practitioners and administrators

Despite having an official letter from the MHESR supporting my research and confirming my identity, recruiting participants from HE was challenging. In total, I interviewed five individuals from three different HEIs, two public and one private (see Table 4.4). As per the norm for the region, the websites of HEIs (the elite tier of HEIs' websites are an exception) were not maintained and email addresses were either usually not up-to-date or their users non-responsive.

Table 4.4

HEI participants

Name (pseudonym)	Public or private HEI	Type of position held
Dindar	Public HEI	Academic practitioner; Director
Jalil		Academic practitioner; HoD
Kamal	Private HEI	Administration; Director
Kara		Administration
Safa	Public HEI	Academic practitioner

Note. HEI participants (n=5) with pseudonyms grouped by organisation, with type of HEI, and type of position held at time of interview.

Using purposeful sampling, I emailed six public and five private HEIs within Erbil governate using the email addresses found on their websites and got two responses, one from a public HEI and one from a private HEI, who I went on to interview. In a bid to try to recruit more participants, I tried to visit a number of the universities in-person, and I was received by representatives from two of the universities I visited. They said they would contact me to arrange interviews, but I did not hear from them again and

nor did they return my emails. The private HEI where I was working at that time also refused to participate, but the Rector did put me in touch with two of his colleagues at a public HEI, who did agree to participate.

4.6.4 Training providers

Snowball sampling is responsible for the recruitment of these two participants, Dara and Jawan, and unlike the recruitment of the other participants it was straightforward after the initial contact had been made.

4.7 The interview process

The interviews done in 2020 were done online using either Zoom or Skype and were recorded. One interview was done in 2021 and three more in 2022. These were done in-person and audio recording was not permitted. Audio recordings have become a taken for granted feature of qualitative interviews (Rutakumwa, Mugisha, Bernays, Kabunga, Tumwekwase, Mbonye, & Seeley, 2020). However, I did not challenge the participants' requests, first, because it would be unethical, and second, because I had faced numerous challenges in recruiting participants. I had lost access to an employer-participant earlier in the data collection process, and I did not want a reoccurrence of this. Moreover, I wanted to establish trust between myself and the participants. Because the value of the insights shared with me by the participants on graduate employability in KRI depend on the participants willingness to talk to me (Knott et al., 2022), I did not want to jeopardise their willingness to talk to me. Therefore, I took detailed notes of these interviews and at times wrote down direct phrases said by the participants. As I was concerned with taking detailed notes, these interviews were longer than the recorded ones as the participants frequently stopped and repeated themselves to allow me to keep pace. On average, the recorded interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes.

Immediately after each of the interviews, I typed up the recordings and my notes. The content of the non-recorded interviews were checked by the participants for accuracy immediately after the interview and before I typed up my notes.

The participants did not see the questions before the interviews. I was unsure as to whether this was the best approach to take because for the majority of the participants, English is not their first language. However, I was concerned that if I shared the questions beforehand, their responses may be scripted. Therefore, I followed Tuckman's (1972) procedural advice and informed the participants of the topic and nature of the interview giving sufficient information to assure the participant that their inclusion adds value to the study. I began each interview focusing on building rapport with the participants by introducing myself and answering any questions that the participants had (Cohen et al., 2007). The first interview question asks the participants to share their personal experiences of finding work in KRI, which in addition to yielding valuable data for the research questions served a double purpose of breaking the ice between us as participants reminisced about their time spent as students and then finding work as graduates. At the end of each interview, I invited the participants to share what advice they would give a student in KRI regarding their employability. This question's function was to provide the participants with the opportunity to discuss anything else that I may have neglected to ask and which they thought was important.

4.8 Transcription

The recordings and notes were transcribed the same day as the interviews. I replayed the recordings using VLC Player using its feature to slow down the speed of the recording. Even while utilising this feature, the verbatim transcription process was time-consuming with each interview taking several hours to transcribe. However, Braun

and Clarke (2006) say that transcribing the data from its audio form provides the opportunity for the researcher to begin to immerse their self in the data. During the first phase of transcription, the recording speed was slowed down and paused regularly with play backs. After each recording was fully transcribed, I played the recording in full to check its accuracy. For the interviews that were not audio-recorded, I typed up the notes and made it clear through formatting which parts of the notes were direct phases uttered by the participants. In the transcripts, I included all the filler words used by the participants, but in the presentation of verbatim quotes in chapter five, these have been removed. During the interviews, I noted down non-verbal cues given by participants. These are also included in the transcripts. All participants were given pseudonyms, and each transcript has been saved under the participant's pseudonym as well as removing all identifying remarks from them.

4.9 Data analysis

The data analysis began after the first interview, and I followed the procedures given in Creswell's (2013) data analysis spiral for thematic analysis. Creswell describes the qualitative data analysis process as being labour intensive, and Braun and Clarke (2006) describe the role of the researcher as being active throughout the analysis phase. Braun and Clarke explain how the researcher must actively reflect on how their assumptions impact their analysis of the data. Themes emerging from the data and researchers giving voice to their participants are both implausible notions of data analysis, they say, and such analytical beliefs denote passivity on the part of the researcher. Instead, Braun and Clarke say that themes are conceived in the researcher's head and are the product of the researcher's ways of thinking about the phenomenon under study, the data, and the connections that the researcher makes between them.

Moreover, by selecting which parts of the data to extract, analyse, and present, the researcher can be said to be actively silencing participants' voices as well as 'giving voice' to them (Fine, 2002).

The literature that I had read on graduate employability informed my assumptions about what I might find in the data. For example, the need for students and graduates to upskill themselves to become the ideal graduate. By reflecting on my assumptions throughout the analysis stage, I was actively constructing themes through my engagement with the data and selecting extracts that evidenced these themes while actively working towards managing my bias.

4.9.1 Managing and organising the data

Keeping organised in a qualitative research study is important (Patton, 2015) because the amounts of data that semi-structured interviews can yield is massive and at times was overwhelming. To ensure I stayed organised, in NVivo, I organised the data sets, that is to say, the individual transcripts, according to the type of stakeholder and saved each one using a consistent naming system as recommended by Bazeley (2013). Then in a password protected Excel spreadsheet, I recorded information related to when, where, and how the data were collected along with the participants' names and their pseudonyms (Creswell, 2013).

4.9.2 Reading and memoing emergent ideas

The process of immersion in the data began with the transcription process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and continued once the data sets were organised in NVivo. Patton (2015) says that in qualitative data analysis, any software used is not a replacement for the researcher as "the real analytical work takes place in your head" (p. 530-531). I began by reading through the transcripts several times in NVivo to get 'a feel

for them' as a whole (Agar, 1980), creating memos in the margins using the software, and coding extracts of the data sets according to my emergent ideas.

The memos are not descriptive in character but include my reflections on the data as well as my attempt at synthesising and analysing the information (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) with consideration of who said it, why they may have said it and factoring in the effect that my identity may have had on their response. Some participants used metaphors and analogies to explain or conceptualise their responses. The language, style, and content used in these helped me to establish ideas in the beginning of the analysis stage. I have added to the memos each time that I have reapproached the data over the past two and a half years, which Miles et al. (2014) say, allows researchers to keep track of how their codes and themes evolve throughout the analysis and writing up stages.

The codes that I produced reflect my assumptions and perspectives on the topic and the data that I bring with me, and they reflect my understanding and interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2013). I approached the coding of the data inductively, and the codes generated were data-driven. This is to say that I did not code the data to specifically answer the four research questions but coded the data according to patterns that I saw in the data. In the next step, I analysed the relationship between the codes, now themes, and the research questions. Inductive coding was purposefully used to avoid 'missing' features of the data that may have been overlooked if I had coded according to the specifics of the research questions only. The codes were generated through my iterative re-reading of the data and memos. With each re-reading of the data, similar codes were merged, duplicated codes deleted, and illustrative extracts were highlighted for use in the write-up of this thesis.

4.9.3 Describing and classifying codes into themes

Creswell (2013) describes this next step, the organising of codes into themes, as "the heart of qualitative data analysis" (p. 189) and is where the interpretative analysis of the codes begins to create themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Within NVivo, I grouped codes according to connections that I made between them into themes and sub-themes. Using the software helped me to stay organised during this phase. For each theme, I wrote a brief description of it using the 'Node Properties' box. Braun and Clarke (2006) warn researchers not to develop themes that are too complex so by reviewing the description as I added or deleted codes, I monitored the coherency of the themes.

4.9.4 Developing and assessing interpretations

A latent level of interpretation was used to interpret the themes, which involves examining the "underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies [sic]" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84) of the data. Describing the data is insufficient. It is my role, as the researcher, to actively examine what was said by the participants and to theorise it within their sociocultural contexts. To do this, I used Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 2002) theories of habitus and capital and Freire's (1970/2014) critical pedagogy as a lens with which to interpret the data.

To ensure that I comprehensively interpreted the themes, I adopted Yin's (2017) approach, where I considered the completeness, fairness, empirical accuracy, value added, and credibility of my interpretation. The parameters of the completeness of my analysis had to be altered due to the difficulties that I faced in recruiting participants that would share documentary evidence with me. However, the interview data were comprehensively analysed through my iterative re-reading of the transcripts and memos. As the interpreter of the data, I speak for the data and am responsible for the truthfulness and insight that it sheds on the research topic. Therefore, I approached the

interpretation of the data in a fair manner by employing reflexivity as a means of minimising my personal bias in my interpretation. By examining my pre-held assumptions and beliefs and how these might affect my interpretation, I actively worked to manage my bias. Moreover, by including multiple participants who represent different stakeholders in the study, I incorporated diverse viewpoints that helped to minimise the impact of personal bias.

Then to ensure the case study's empirical accuracy, I ensured that my analysis reflects the data and is supported by the evidence from the case study. By using Bourdieu's theories of habitus and capital and Freire's critical pedagogy to frame my analysis, provide insights, and offer explanations, I add value to the analysis and provide a deeper and richer understanding of graduate employability in KRI. I demonstrate the credibility of my study by providing transparent documentation of the data collection and analysis process and ensuring that my analysis is attuned to my research questions. One final point that I would like to finish this section with is that I consider my interpretation of the data as only one of many other possible interpretations that can be discarded or accepted by others (Schutt, 2012).

4.9.5 Representing and visualising the data

The final twist in Creswell's (2013) data analysis spiral is the representation and visualisation of the data. Some data have been presented in tabular form while key data extracts that illustrate key themes are woven into the text with the aim of providing evidence in support of my analysis of the data.

4.10 Reflections

For the second assignment for the second module of this Ed.D., *Learners and Learning*, I evaluated a number of theories of learning within my learning and teaching context, which at that time was in the Kingdom of Bahrain. It was while completing this

assignment that I began to consider the relationship that the Bahraini leadership has with reforming their education system to produce a more productive labour force as being paradoxical (Whiteside, 2017a). Like KRI, Bahrain as a rentier economy has a social contract between the government and its people. Again, like KRI, in Bahrain rote learning has historically been the favoured teaching methodology. I theorized that rote learning was purposefully being used to keep learners perpetually at stage one of Perry's (1968) student development theory and of Grow's (1991) staged self-directed learning model. At stage one of Perry and Grow's models, learners accept teachers as the absolute authority and are completely dependent on them. By keeping learners at stage one, education can be wielded as a socially reproductive tool that produces passive and submissive graduates who accept the word of those in authority. It is this conflicting relationship between a need to modernize and a desire to retain power that has led me to carry out this research on graduate employability in KRI.

In a later module of this Ed.D., I wrote a paper for an assignment where I had to analyse my 'ways of knowing', which is also the title of the module. I reviewed this paper before writing this section, so I could reflect on how my ways of knowing have developed. As I found myself doing back in module four, I initially wanted to implement change in the institution where I worked. However, after reflection, I reached a conclusion that as an outsider, I am from the UK and I was working in Bahrain at that time, I should deepen my knowledge and cultural awareness of the research problem first and foremost. To try to understand the research problem from the viewpoints of others rather than trying to implement change based on my limited understanding and judgement (Whiteside, 2017b). This awareness informed my decision to undertake a holistic exploratory reflexive case study of graduate employability in KRI, so I could explain the why and how (Priya, 2020) from multiple viewpoints. The reflection that I

did in module four helped me to understand that this piece of research does not have to be the catalyst of ground-breaking societal change but offers outsiders like myself insight into the supercomplexities that surround the issue of graduate employability in KRI.

The complexities of KRI's society and institutions at all levels and in all sectors has at times overwhelmed me in the writing of this thesis. I spent many months organising the information presented and discussed in chapter three of this thesis (much of which has been deleted in the revision process). My aim was to provide a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) that would enable readers to judge if the findings of this study are transferable to their contexts. As I kept returning to this chapter time and again and re-reading the official reports, and research and news articles on KRI, which report a bleak picture of economic, educational, and institutional development in the region, I began to understand the pessimistic tone of one of the research participants in relation to being able to induce change in the region. The fourth, pragmatic, research question asks how HEIs can improve their students' employability, which indicates a hope that this study would in some way bring about change in addition to deepening understanding on the issue. William, who is an outsider like me, said:

> I don't want to throw a wet blanket on things, but you need to be conscious of the challenges that face any sort of institutional improvement in Kurdistan. There have been people who poked and tried to make differences but for one reason or another, it doesn't get very far. This doesn't diminish what needs to be done. That's your safe ground to talk clearly about what needs to be done but avoid getting into the cloud that sits over all that, because it gets depressing.

I quoted William at length here because his words reverberated around in my head as I wrote chapter three, analysed the data, and reflected on the interview process. I was the person, the outsider, poking around, thinking they can make a difference but probably

will not considering all the inherent complexities bound up in KRI's political, economic, and social landscapes. The safe ground that William speaks of refers to the findings that have been published already by international organisations, such as RAND, UNESCO, and the World Bank, which have been referred to in this thesis. I interpret the cloud that hangs over KRI as the partisan rivalries that fuelled the Kurdish civil war in the 1990s dividing the region into KDP and PUK strongholds. Rivalries that continue to this day, and which actively work against national development efforts (Mamshai, 2021) that would help improve graduates' employability. The optimism that I started this study with faded as I began to internalise the hopelessness of the situation.

As I started my data collection, I thought I had a relatively good understanding of the political, economic, and social contexts in KRI as I had lived in the region for a combined total of three and a half years by that time and had completed a lot of reading on the region for the research proposal. However, I believe that if I had written chapter three before I had started collecting the data, I would have been better equipped for the interviews. As a novice researcher and interviewer, the interview process was already daunting and when factoring in the power relations, particularly between myself and the ministry officials, I think that having a better awareness of the complexities of KRI's political and economic landscape characterised by tribalism and partisan factions would have benefited me. Swartz (1997) says how in social sciences there is symbolic domination of the researcher over the participants. I, however, did not experience this, and I attribute this to my novice researcher and interviewer status as well as knowing that in KRI the discussion of public issues like graduate employability are censored (OHCHR, 2021). With this in mind, I was always grateful that I had got access to many of the participants and from my perspective, gave the participants symbolic domination over me as they could revoke my access to them at any time.

The writing up of chapter three prompted me to go back to the data and my interpretation of it. In my initial interpretation of the data, I held a negative perception of public sector employment and, admittedly, of those whose preference is to seek out that employment, and I agreed with Louie and William's shared perception that people who want to work for the government are characterised as lazy. In Priya's (2020) evaluation of case studies, she says that the researcher must be diligent in not allowing her bias and preconceptions to colour the analysis of the data. However, after finishing writing chapter three and reflecting on some anecdotal evidence that I witnessed, which happened not in relation to this research, I realised that I had been judging public sector workers from my outsider perspective instead of interpreting their realities from their perspectives, which is what I had set out to do through this case study. To counter this imposition of my bias, values, and dispositions, which is to say my habitus, on the data, I went back to it and re-evaluated my interpretations with my refreshed reflexivity.

4.11 Outsider-insider research

Researchers have multiple identities (McNess, Arthur, & Crossley, 2015). I am not just a novice researcher but also a student and a teacher. I am a white British educated female living in a male-dominated patriarchal and conservative Middle Eastern society. During the interviews, my identity and positionality changed depending on who I was interviewing. For example, all of the participants who represented private sector employers are foreign, so in these interviews, I was more of an insider researcher. When the researcher has insider status, they are more likely to be accepted more easily by the participants who are in turn more likely to open up and provide data that have greater depth (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Similarly, because of our commonality, I felt more able to ask difficult questions and to question what locals may

describe as sensitive topics such as the KRG's policies and practices more directly (Chhabra, 2020).

When interviewing the ministry officials and HE staff, who are from KRI, I became more of an outsider researcher in as much as I do not share the same culture, ethnicity, or nationality as the participants. In these interviews, I believe my outsider status put me in the perspective of the participants as an individual set apart from "the corrupting influence of group loyalties" (Merton, 1972, p. 30). In KRI, society is heavily divided along partisan lines with one executive member of the PUK Political Bureau publicly saying in April 2023 that the two parties are on the brink of a civil war ("PUK Official", 2023). Being an outsider, I believe, provided the space for the participants to speak directly and honestly about how they perceive graduate employability in KRI and which I, as the outsider researcher, can disseminate to communities outside of their own.

As I am a HE teacher in a private HEI in KRI, I am not a detached outsider in my research; my positionality is fluid (Crossley, Lore, & McNess, 2016). I have a genuine interest in the improvement of HE in KRI and for the region's graduates to find meaningful employment. Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) say that doing qualitative research means outsider researchers cannot be truly separate from the study because of the integral role of researchers in the analysis and interpretation of the data. The voices of participants are heard each time we read the transcripts and what the participants share with us, the researchers, "affects our personhood" (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 61). As a qualitative researcher collects their data, which is to say their participants' experiences, the position of the researcher changes as they become more knowledgeable of the phenomenon under study. This fluid positionality does not fit into

the strict binary labels of insider-outsider and instead calls for researchers to acknowledge and accept that there are other ways of knowing and of understanding (Kanuha, 2000).

4.12 Ethical considerations

This study has operated under the principle of do no harm (Cohen et al., 2007) and has abided by UoL's ethical guidelines. Observing this ethical principle and adhering to UoL's ethical guidelines throughout this study have led to a number of challenges for me, the novice researcher, to overcome.

The major ethical consideration is the KRG's unwillingness to accept criticism levelled against it. Journalists who have criticized the KRG have been assaulted and even killed (Alshamary, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2021). At the forefront of my mind during every phase of this study has been the cost/benefits ratio concept (Cohen et al., 2007), which has prompted me to make decisions to try to keep the balance in the favour of benefits. For example, by opting for an appreciative study (Bushe, 2013, Cooperrider, & Whitney, 2005), the focus switches to what is already being done well and using that as a platform to make recommendations for improvements. Cohen et al. (2007) point out that in some cultures, informed consent is not as stringently applied. KRI, I believe falls into this category, which could be in part due to the academic research community in the region being an emerging one and so is still in the process of enabling structures and a culture that promotes sound ethical conduct (Silverman, Edwards, Shamoo, & Matar, 2013). Silverman et al. (2013) say that in some cultures papers that require signatures do not symbolise a relationship built around trust. In KRI, participants may have been unwilling to sign their name on paper because they may hypothesise that if ever read by the authorities, their signature confirms their

involvement in the study. Because of the KRG's unwillingness to accept criticism of it and the actions it takes against those that do, individuals may therefore feel that signing an informed consent form and being given a pseudonym is not robust enough protection against their perceived ramifications. To balance out the benefits in favour of the costs, I asked two critical friends from KRI to review my interview questions for their language clarity and to highlight questions that they believed were bias or leading.

Before conducting interviews, consent was obtained from the participants' organisations before obtaining signed informed consent from the participants themselves. Once organisational consent was obtained, the participants were sent the participant information sheet (see Appendix B) that outlined what is required of them should they choose to take part, that they can withdraw from the study at any time and request that their information be destroyed at any time prior to publication of this thesis, and that they will not be identifiable from the results. If they agreed, the participants signed the participant informed consent form (see Appendix C). At this point, participants indicated that they did not want to share institutional/organisational documents with myself. During the interviews, participants could pause or stop the interview at any time. One participant did withdraw from the study during their interview. All information that they shared with me is not included in this study. Following the conclusion of the interview, the participants were given the participant debrief sheet (see Appendix D). Where permission was given to record, the recordings were transcribed and anonymised with all participants being given pseudonyms within 24 hours, and then the recordings were deleted. The typed transcripts were saved onto a password protected hard drive. The hard drive and handwritten field notes are kept in a locked safe box to which only I have access. As per UoL policy, the data are kept for five years from the collection date.

4.13 Validity and reliability

There are external and internal types of validity. The former is concerned with whether the findings can be generalised to a wider population. However, Yin (2009) argues that this is not the purpose of a case study, which is not conducted on a sample population. Therefore, to assess the external validity of a research study, a replica study should be done. For a replica study to be undertaken, the researcher should provide full details for future researchers to follow. The details of this study's data collection are outlined above along with a graphical visual of the process followed. Internal validity, Priya (2020) says, is contentious when a case study studies a phenomenon, in this case, graduate employability. Priya (2020) continues to define internal validity as being where "spurious, unmeasured or unaccounted factors" (p. 101) could be accountable for the study's findings opposed to what the researcher suggested. As case studies are conducted in real-life contexts, it is challenging for a researcher to robustly ensure that these unwanted elements do not creep into the research. Careful consideration of these unwanted and unmeasured factors and how they may have affected the study and the findings must be undertaken by the researcher (Priya, 2020). This has been done throughout the data analysis stage and where any unwanted or unmeasured factors could have affected the findings, these are indicated in the discussion.

The reliability of a case study refers to whether the study's findings would be consistently reproduced if the research were repeated (Yin, 2017). Kvale (1996), however, points out that there could be as many different interpretations of interview data as there are researchers. The point being made is that in qualitative research, the researcher's positionality directly impacts on the interpretation of the data. To make the reliability of this piece of research more robust, I have provided in detail the research

design and methods used as well as sharing my positionality and reflections on the study to aid those who may wish to replicate this study.

4.14 Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the philosophical structure of this case study along with the research methodology to give full transparency to the reader. Table 4.5 on the next page summarises the key decisions made in this chapter.

Table 4.5

Overview of the methodology

Part	Decision made
Ontology	Interpretivism
Epistemology	Constructivism
Research design	Single reflexive exploratory case study
Methodology	Qualitative
Data collection	Semi-structured interviews
Sample population and size	Private sector employers (n=5) Ministry officials (n=5); consultant (n=1) HE staff (n=5) Training providers (n=2)
Analysis	Thematic analysis that follows Creswell's (2013) data analysis spiral and Yin's (2017) five stages of analysis
Conceptual explanatory framework	Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 2002) theories of habitus and capital Freire's (1970/2014) critical pedagogy

Chapter 5 Findings and discussion

This chapter presents the findings and discussion of my interpretation of the data using Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 2002) theories of habitus and capital and Freire's (1970/2014) critical pedagogy as the conceptual framework.

5.1 Research question 1

Why are some graduates more or less employable than other graduates in the private sector?

5.1.1 Introduction

Through three themes, this question explores why some graduates are more or less employable than other graduates in the private sector. The first theme is global employability discourses have been internalised by stakeholders. The second theme is graduates of private HEIs are perceived as being more employable. The third theme is sociocultural factors position some graduates more favourably than others in the labour market.

5.1.2 Theme 1: Global employability discourses have been internalised

When asked what graduate employability is and what advice participants would give to a student in relation to their employability, participants mentioned attitude, soft skills, experience and professionality, languages, CV and interview, technology skills, and wasta (see Table 5.1). Reference to these skills and attributes come up repeatedly throughout participants' responses demonstrating support for the graduate employability discourse endorsed assumption that with the possession of soft skills there can be an ideal graduate. The responses demonstrate that graduates in KRI need to possess the first six, and arguably the seventh, skills and attributes in Table 5.1 if they are to have success in competing against their peers in the graduate labour market.

Table 5.1

Participants' perceptions of graduate employability

Perceptions of what is needed to be employable	Illustrative quote	Raised by
Attitude	Attitude toward work is a part of graduate employability and will have a lot of influence over whether they are employed. (Rachel)	Carol, Chad, Dara, Dindar, Gohdar, Louie, Jawan, Rachel, Raman, William
Soft skills	Students should not concentrate a lot of their thoughts on getting high academic marks rather than learning because learning is everything. Students should focus on learning soft skills because most of the students who have high marks still lack the basic soft skills to join the [labour] market. (Dindar)	Bilal, Carol, Chad, Dara, Dindar, Gohdar, Jawan, Jalil, Kamal, Kara, Louie, Rachel, Rahand, Raman, Safa
Experience and professionality	Learn some business etiquette before graduating. The problem here is that people don't go out to work early, so they are real fresh. (Gohdar)	Carol, Dara, Dindar, Gohdar, Jawan, Louie, Safa
Languages	Languages are key. Not just English but Arabic too. As a part of Iraq, Arabic is mandatory in many job descriptions. (Carol)	Bilal, Carol, Dara, Dindar, Elie, Gohdar, Jawan, Jalil, Kamal, Kara, Louie, Rachel, Rahand, Raman, Safa
CV and interview	Being able to write a good CV, knowing how to present themselves in the interview, and being able to answer the phone professionally. (Jawan)	Carol, Dara, Dindar, Gohdar, Jalil, Jawan, Kamal, Kara, Louie, Rachel, Safa

Perceptions of what is needed to be employable	Illustrative quote	Raised by
Technology skills	Basic computer skills would differentiate one applicant from another when applying for a job. (Louie)	Alan, Bilal, Dara, Gohdar, Jawan, Louie, Raman, Safa
Wasta	Most of our students' families are in a high position, so they can get help from their family beside their skills. This is one point that we have to focus on. (Kamal)	Chad, Dara, Jawan, Kamal, Kara, Louie, Rachel

The participants' responses demonstrate an internalisation of the tenets of employability discourses that promote the skills agenda and employability as the responsibility of the individual (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Boliver, 2017; Stoten, 2018). Several participants mentioned specifically that graduates should take responsibility for getting some work experience (see Table 5.1), which is the top-ranked skill in demand by employers in the RAND report and cited as lacking in the UNESCO report. Jawan explains:

> The issue is that people here don't go out to work early, so they don't learn business etiquette. I grew up in the UK and from 14 years old I had a paper round. Okay it's nothing special, but that job taught me to be punctual and self-reliant on getting the job done. Then at 16, I got a job in a shop. Again nothing special, but I learned skills. Here, graduates usually don't have any work experience when they finish university.

Jawan's comment framed within habitus shows that from not having exposure to the work environment before graduating, a graduate's habitus lacks dispositions related to employability skills, such as punctuality and self-reliance, which would come under experience and professionality in Table 5.1. Having a part-time job before starting university or while at university provides a new field within which a student's habitus has the opportunity to be transformed and cultural and social capital acquired, which

will enable the student to be more like a "fish in water" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127) in the graduate labour market after they graduate.

Below, two sub-themes are discussed. The first is academic credentials are not valued as highly as other skills and attributes, and the second is the ideal graduate is skilful (and has wasta).

5.1.2.1 Sub-theme: Academic credentials are not valued as highly as other skills and attributes

What is significantly absent from Table 5.1 are academic credentials. Academic credentials were *not* mentioned by participants which supports the findings of the UNESCO report that says that when employers were asked about factors that affect their recruiting decisions, academic qualifications were seldom mentioned as being a determining factor. This could be because academic credentials are now taken for granted, or it could be because of the perceived lack of quality and relevance of HE degree programmes, which was specifically mentioned by employers in the ICT sector in the UNESCO report (2019), "Programmes of study on offer do not match the job opportunities available. Curricula are old; programmes are too theoretical; teachers are poorly trained" (p. 38). It could also indicate that there has been a shift in focus from credentials to other factors not limited to but including skills as posited by Boliver (2017) and Tomlinson (2008). Boliver (2017) contends that the emphasis employers place on skills is not because of the poor quality and irrelevance of credentials but to mask employers' prejudice hiring practices, an idea that is explored further under the third research question.

This finding, that academic credentials are not valued as highly as skills is significant for planners of KRI's HE system. In chapter three, we saw that the quality of

provision of public HE is poor (Atrushi & Woodfield, 2018) with outdated curricula (Maneshi, 2019) that does not meet labour market needs. As the majority of high school graduates entering HE study at public HEIs, the scale of the problem is massive if these HEIs' curricula do not teach skills that are in demand by the region's employers because it places privately educated HE graduates, who are the minority, in a better position on the graduate labour market playing field. An assumption of graduate employability discourses is that recruitment is played on a level playing field. However, because the majority of HE students in KRI's public HEIs are not taught soft skills, this assumption is false.

5.1.2.2 Sub-theme: The ideal graduate is skilful (and has wasta)

The first six perceptions of what skills and attributes graduates should possess presented in Table 5.1 constitute a list of combined attributes that make up the ideal graduate found in the employability literature (Burke et al., 2017). The seventh perception, wasta, is not a skill that fits the typical view of the ideal graduate as found in employability discourses. However, just like soft skills, wasta is a form of capital that an individual uses with greater or lesser skill to successfully gain employment. Wasta is arguably the most influential capital that a graduate can possess as it has the potential to trump all the other six skills and attributes in Table 5.1. For example, graduates that do have the other six skills and attributes to an extent that would make them hireable but who do not have sufficient wasta will lose out to a graduate who may not be in possession of the other six skills and attributes but who does have wasta (Edwards & Rwanduzy, 2018; Hutchings and Weir, 2006; Karolak, 2016; Mohamed & Hamdy, 2008). The RAND report says that 63 percent of employers in their study recruit using word of mouth through their family and friends or informal networks, which is a form of wasta. One consequence of this is that there can be a mismatch between the job role and

employee (Ramady, 2016) where the employee does not have the knowledge and/or capabilities to fulfil the requirements of the job and so without wasta would be otherwise unattainable (Karolak, 2016). If this is the reality faced by KRI's graduates, it is imperative that students while at university are provided with opportunities to build up stocks of social capital.

5.1.3 Theme 2: Graduates of private HEIs are perceived as more employable

The hierarchy of universities (Holmes, 2013) contributes to why some graduates are more employable than others. Employer-participants from private sector organisations said that they believe graduates from private HEIs are better prepared for employment than their publicly educated counterparts as illustrated by Rachel, Carol and Louie:

> Candidates from the private universities are better prepared than the public university candidates. In terms of an all-round preparedness, maturity, expectation. (Rachel)
>
> Private universities like UKH are better. They tend to have better hard skills and soft skills, overall. The problem with public universities, I'm saying this based on feedback that we get from our clients, is that the whole curriculum is just based on learning some facts without thinking about them whereas private universities are different in terms of academic quality. (Carol)
>
> There's some kind of work ethic that the private universities are teaching them. Your larger Kurdish population, in my opinion, has been taught to be complacent and just want to work for the government. Graduates from UKH and AUIS, however, are quite hireable right out of school. They have the English skill and know how to present their skillset and CV. (Louie)

It is important to note here that not all private HEIs in KRI are considered elite institutions. However, the two institutions cited by Carol and Louie are considered to be elite HEIs. Thus, graduates from these institutions are likely to possess greater amounts of cultural capital. Moreover, as private HEIs are fee-paying, there is a greater likelihood that the families of the students who attend them have greater economic capital, and hence social capital to draw upon in the labour market than their publicly educated

counterparts. Furthermore, it is noteworthy to mention that only graduates of public HEIs were offered public sector employment upon graduation (until this policy was stopped in 2014). Therefore, private HEIs have been under sustained pressure to produce hireable graduates since they were established, which in terms of habitus, would mean that private HEIs are likely depositors of dispositions of independency from the rentier government in their students.

Louie's comment raises the issue of language skills, which were mentioned by several other participants as being a key factor as why some graduates are more employable than others as well as highlighting the hierarchy of universities. The elite private HEIs in KRI are English medium whereas all public HEIs are Kurdish medium:

> From what I have been told by private sector employers, graduates from UKH, AUIS, and AUD are easily getting jobs because their studies are in English and so they speak English fluently. (Gohdar)

> Language skills are key. I wouldn't hire from Salaheddin University as their students have no English skills. (Jawan)

The bluntness of Jawan's opinion reveals its sharpness when the number of graduates from Salaheddin University is considered. Salaheddin University is the oldest and largest public HEI in KRI, and every year, it graduates approximately 20,000 students. If these 20,000 graduates are immediately dismissed by private sector employers because of a general belief that their English skills are inadequate, this poses a major obstacle for these 20,000 graduates who are lacking in this form of cultural capital. Even though Jawan's comment is based on her personal opinion, the assertion behind her comment is that public HEIs' graduates are not appealing hires for the private sector which is shared by the other participants and highlights the pressing need for a review of public HEIs' policies in relation to language studies.

In addition to a lack of language skills, Gohdar says that technology skills are also lacking in graduates of public HEIs:

> The RAND report was published in 2014, and still employers are talking about something being missing. First, is English. Graduates from English medium universities speak English fluently and they easily can get a job. Second, is computer and technology proficiency. Smart phones and laptops are everywhere, but they [graduates of public HEIs] have a very limited usage of it because they use them for social media only. Not for professional use. A graduate from accounting cannot use accounting software, for example.

The prominence that employers, who Gohdar has contact with, give English skills puts graduates of public HEIs at a disadvantage as English is not a part of the curriculum. Moreover, with relation to the use of technology in HE, Alan said, "The introduction of ICT only started to be implemented [in public HEIs] during COVID-19 with the use of Zoom and Microsoft Teams". Students, and their families, who enrol at private HEIs most likely already possess greater amounts of cultural and social capital than students who attend public HEIs and so are already at an advantage. Attending an elite English-medium private HEI can only increase their stock of capital and subsequently their chances in the graduate labour market.

For Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990), all pedagogy represents symbolic violence. Education is, according to Bourdieu, a force of social reproduction that reinforces inequalities and does not oppose them, and he further contends that education is a part of wider structural inequalities in society and that educational curricula is designed to reinforce and reproduce these inequalities. Watkins (2018) criticizes Bourdieu's claim that all pedagogy is symbolic violence and explains that "it [symbolic violence] occurs if knowledge and skill are either not, or only, minimally, realised" (p. 49). In KRI, the huge disparity between the quality of public and private educational institutions puts the students going through the public system at a distinct

disadvantage and so positions them as victims of Watkin's interpretation of Bourdieu's symbolic violence.

5.1.4 Theme 3: Sociocultural factors make some graduates more or less employable

This theme is split into two sub-themes. The first discusses the use of wasta, and the second discusses dependency on the KRG as provider.

5.1.4.1 Sub-theme: The use of wasta negatively affects graduate employability

The primary sociocultural factor that makes one graduate more employable than another is the possession and use of wasta. As mentioned earlier, the possession of this seventh 'skill' in Table 5.1 trumps possession of all the other six. It is in this reality where the question of whether it is a lack of wasta or a lack of skills that most greatly impacts on graduate employability. None of the participants who work in public HEIs or at the ministries mentioned wasta. However, the two participants who work in private HEIs brought up the use of wasta when asked about strategies that their HEI employs to improve their graduates' employability, Kamal said:

> Most of our students' families are in a high position, so they [our graduates] can get help from their family besides their skills. This is one point we have to focus on.

Because of the hierarchy of universities in KRI between public (and non-elite private) and the elite HEIs, graduates of the latter have more cultural capital that place them in a better position in the graduate labour market. Kamal's indirect mention of the use of wasta by his university's graduates in the labour market shows that graduates of his private HEI, regardless of their possession of valued cultural capital, are unabashed towards using social capital to gain employment.

The pervasiveness of the use of wasta and preference for informal recruitment methods are reflected in Louie and Chad's responses.

> Every time I've gotten a job it's been through people that me or my family know. I've never sent my CV to a random company or searched for any job online. I guess I am lucky in the sense that I know lots of people. Your average Kurdish person would call it wasta. (Louie)

> The lower-level jobs are preferentially filled by people that people who work there already know. Not just the owner's family but everyone's family. The company has gotten to that size now. (Chad)

Though it should be noted that Chad also said that for skilled positions, such as electricians, the possession of wasta alone is insufficient; the candidate must also have the requisite qualifications.

Wasta's deep roots in Middle Eastern sociocultural histories (Romano, 2015), and adopted by KRI, mean it is embedded into KRI's society's habitus where even those who complain of the use of wasta may use it for their own gain without recourse to hesitation (Al-Ramahi, 2008). In the field of the labour market, the use of wasta can benefit a graduate jobseeker who is less suited or worthy than another. This behaviour can be explained using Freire's (1970/2014) concept of duality. He says that the oppressed (the jobseekers) internalise the tools of their oppression (the use of wasta), so they themselves become hosts of their own oppression. This is not dissimilar to using Bourdieu's (1977) theory of habitus to explain this behaviour. Wasta is a disposition that informs and guides an individual's behaviour, which when used may be at the detriment of others within that field. For individuals to realise their duality and to recognise themselves as hosts of their own oppression, Freire (1970/2014) argues that a critical pedagogy must be adopted.

The use of wasta to gain employment during periods of high levels of unemployment like KRI currently has is normal, according to Lackner (2016). Therefore, this means that until external factors to graduates are addressed, such as the endemic corruption found in KRI's political economy and the alignment of HEI degree programmes with the labour market, it is highly unlikely that the use of wasta can be curbed.

5.1.4.2 Sub-theme: Dependency on the KRG as 'provider' negatively affects graduate employability

A second sociocultural factor is the disposition of dependency that has been instilled into individual and collective habitus in KRI by the dual actions of the KRG and political parties and which is paid for by money derived from oil rents. The enduring result is a society made up of individuals whose habitus is characterised by dependency on the governing apparatus to provide opportunities rather than on seeking them out or creating them for themselves:

> Because we are a government university, students are welcomed here for free, so they do nothing about finding a job. They think all they need to do is finish university. Then wait at home, and the government will knock on their door and give them a job. Maybe in my time it was like that but now it's finished. You have to depend on yourself. (Jalil)

In the past, graduates of public HEIs were placed into public sector positions, so they could "do nothing about finding a job" after finishing university. Even though this practice has been largely discontinued, Jalil says that graduates' behaviour has not altered. The data suggest that employers do have an image of an ideal graduate so if students are being inactive in relation to improving their employability, this will position others who are being proactive about their employability more favourably.

5.1.5 Summary

In summary, the data show that there has been a shift from focusing on academic credentials to soft skills as posited by Boliver (2017) and Tomlinson (2008) in KRI and that perceptions of what constitutes graduate employability is largely in line with global employability discourses. The two-tier system of universities in KRI (Jayid et al., 2021) represents symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990; Watkins, 2018) against those students and graduates from the second tier. Graduates of elite private HEIs are placed as forerunners in the graduate labour market through their possession of more valuable cultural capital, which is institutionalised in a degree from an elite private HEI as well as embodied with fluency in English. The latter being a skill that is in particular demand in the private sector (UNESCO, 2019). The RAND report says that if an employer were presented with two candidates, one with good English skills and no relevant degree specialisation and another with no English but the relevant degree specialisation, they would choose the former candidate reasoning that skills can be taught and acquired more swiftly than a language. Social capital in the guise of wasta is used to secure employment and, according to Lackner (2016), its use should come of no surprise because of the scarcity of jobs in KRI. Moreover, a lack of knowledge of how to play the game when it comes to private sector recruitment because of society's dependency on the rentier government to place graduates in employment may also be a contributing factor to the use of wasta in the private sector labour market.

5.2 Research question 2

Which stakeholders are perceived as responsible for graduate employability and why?

5.2.1 Introduction

This question explores the attitudes of the respondents in relation to who they believe are responsible for graduate employability. Mainstream employability discourses say that individuals are responsible for their own employability and that HEIs should equip them with employability skills. The data show that along with agreeing with the mainstream employability discourses that individuals are responsible for their own employability and that HEIs should bear responsibility for equipping students with employability skills. There is, however, still a cultural belief here in KRI that the government has to continue being responsible for the employability of the region's graduates. Four stakeholders are highlighted as being responsible and each are discussed as sub-themes in turn below.

5.2.2 Theme 4: The KRG, ministries of education, HEIs, and graduates all bear responsibility for graduate employability

This theme is broken down into four sub-themes starting with the KRG as being responsible for graduate employability. Followed by the two ministries of education, the MoE and MHESR, then individual HEIs, and finally, graduates themselves.

5.2.2.1 Sub-theme: KRG is responsible

Moreau and Leathwood (2006) and Tomlinson's (2008) research shows that HE students and graduates internalise employability discourses and consider themselves responsible for their own employability or lack of it. In contrast, Jalil's opinion is that in KRI there is still a widespread belief in society that the government is responsible and not the individual. That is to say that individuals do not consider their lack of

employability to be their own fault or as an issue that they should work towards a resolution but rather as an issue that the KRG should find a fix for. This widespread belief is a legacy of the rentier system of governance that the KRG chose to adopt after its establishment in 1992. Jalil said:

> We are all children of the government. It's this culture, background, that the government should give us jobs. Not just any job, but a job that fits our degrees.

Jalil is an academic practitioner and is giving his opinion based on his own perspective and though it cannot be assumed to be representative of wider society, other respondents (Dindar, Gohdar, Jawan, Louie, Raman, William) echoed Jalil's sentiment. Moreover, Jalil has worked in HE for a number of years and is familiar with what students think, which adds to the credibility of his opinion. Jalil's language reveals the extent of the dependency and the normalcy of the dependency that society, the KRG's children in Jalil's analogy, has on the KRG to provide for them. Like parents, the KRG provides for its children and so nurtures a habitus informed by dependency. As the KRG opted to continue with the rentier state model when KRI won its semi-autonomous status from Baghdad in 1991, the expectation of being given a job by the government is not irrational and is a part of society's habitus. Moreover, even after the economic crisis of 2014 when the KRG announced the public sector hiring freeze, the two political parties in control of the government continued offering employment in exchange for political support (Jayid et al., 2021). In light of this, can it be considered surprising that people still continue to believe the government is responsible for providing employment? For a shift in habitus to occur, a stronger and more coherent message is needed from the KRG, which, importantly, is upheld by the two political parties.

5.2.2.2 Sub-theme: MoE and MHESR are responsible

During Rachel's interview, she said that she believes that HEIs should take responsibility for teaching employability skills but that, in her opinion, the skills that she believes makes an individual employable need to be developed from a young age starting well before university:

> Social responsibility, accountability and personal responsibility are being addressed in our primary classes, but it's in a particular environment so when the students leave that environment and they go back into their homes, let's say. Those ideas aren't being reinforced, not in every household, so they need to continue to be addressed throughout university too.

Rachel's opinion could be influenced by her vocation. She herself is an educator who oversees curriculum design throughout the grades K-12 in a private school. Unknowingly, Rachel is describing the process of how habitus is formed in children. The habitus is primarily formed and influenced by interactions with the family and then later at school. Rachel says, however, that at times, the dispositions learned at school are in conflict with those at home, which supports what Jalil said about the societal belief that "we are all children of the government". Rachel uses her point to support the need for employability skills to be embedded throughout the education system. Instilling a good attitude towards work needs to be started as early as possible with as many positive role models as possible if it is to inform the durable habitus. Parents are the most obvious and invaluable role models in this sense because if children grow up exposed to the idea of being employed and subsidised by the government as the norm, this informs their habitus.

Embedding employability skills within the public education system's curriculum is the responsibility of both the MoE and MHESR and requires cooperation and collaboration between the two ministries. However, creating a coherent employability

discourse to be embedded into the entire education system would be challenging, according to Rahand:

> There is no integration between the MoE and MHESR. No memorandum of understanding to counter the belief of all children should go to university. Throughout school, children need to be educated in the different pathways of education and how to make a living.

The MoE is under the control of the KDP, and the MHESR is under the control of the PUK. The political division stirred up by the two party-rule has a direct negative impact on graduate employability as it prevents a coherent unified strategy between the two education ministries to first, embed employability skills into the curriculum throughout K-12 and into HE. Second, to provide information on alternative education and career pathways other than HE. The sociocultural value that is placed on getting a university degree is instilled into children by their family and as Rahand says, by the school too and encourages the view that opting to take a vocational pathway is inferior to the academic route (Constant et al., 2014).

During HE admissions in 2021, out of the 63,000 high school graduates, 52,000 applied for a public university space. A situation which the Minister of MHESR described as creating "a catastrophe [because it] creates a high number of degrees, graduates and unemployment" (Jangiz, 2021, para. 12). In spite of his acknowledgement that a degree basically equals unemployment after graduation, the minister in the face of mass student protests went on to accept over 43,000 entrants into the public HE system ("Over 43,000 students accepted", 2021), which is only made possible by having two shifts per day (Jangiz, 2021). In addition, the minister instructed private HEIs to reduce their fees (Shakir, 2021) to provide greater access to the fee-paying institutions. These ministerial actions echo back to the pre-2014 purpose of public HEIs as waiting rooms for public sector employment; except today, HEIs are waiting rooms for unemployment.

This situation may be averted through an early intervention where children are educated on what employability is, what it means to be employable, and that a degree is not the golden ticket.

5.2.2.3 Sub-theme: HEIs are responsible

Safa, who is an academic practitioner, explained how in the past HEIs were not duly concerned with producing graduates for the private sector labour market:

> It wasn't until 2016 or 2017 that there was much focus on [public] universities to prepare graduates for the workforce. Universities thought that they were like printing machines. They print the certificate for the student. Then after the students leave, they are no longer the responsibility of the university. … But now, they found that for their graduates to find work that they need to think about the labour market's needs and how to build a bridge between them.

This lax attitude and behaviour of public HEIs towards their graduates' employability as described by Safa is attributable to the discontinued practice of thousands of publicly educated graduates being assigned public sector employment after graduation. Following the public sector hiring freeze, public HEIs found they were faced with a new purpose. No longer are they waiting rooms for public sector employment. The certificates public HEIs are now printing are competing against certificates from elite HEIs which have more valuable cultural capital and must provide their graduates leverage into the private sector labour market. As Safa says, the public HEIs found they needed to rethink their relationship with the private sector by building bridges between the two. By being independent of the private sector labour market, public HEIs were denying their students access to vital cultural and social capital that can position them favourably in the graduate labour market.

As recently (or late) as 2022, an industry advisory board (IAB) for the region was established to build bridges of communication between public HEIs and the private sector to assist HEIs in fulfilling their post-2014 purpose, as Alan says:

> The main function of the IAB is to develop a platform for continuous and sustainable cooperation between universities and the labour market. Employers are asked directly what specific labour is recruited externally and what skills local graduates are lacking. Universities are then expected to respond.

It is clear that Alan believes that HEIs are responsible for graduate employability and must be responsive to the private sector labour market's needs. However, as public HEIs are so highly centralised, it leads me to question what capabilities HEIs have to respond to the needs of industry quickly enough.

5.2.2.4 Sub-theme: Graduates are responsible

Among the respondents who work for the government, that is to say, in public HEIs and ministries, there is wide agreement that individuals have to take responsibility for their own employability. This is not surprising as it echoes employability discourses as found in published labour reports on KRI (Shatz et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2019) and the KRG's rhetoric that graduates must look to the private sector for employment:

> Universities can provide students with soft skills, but then it's important for them to find their own path and be independent. This is what's important. To have the courage to be independent. (Jalil)

> Individuals have to learn to look for possibilities at job fairs and through websites. They have to learn to judge themselves. (Raman)

> Graduates may go to twenty or thirty interviews and not get hired. They need to look at themselves critically and think about how they need to improve themselves and not just whinge about not getting the jobs. (Jawan)

Jalil and Raman's comments sum up the general attitude the respondents have towards graduate employability. That graduates must make creative use of job-seeking resources to work out their own path. That is to say, graduates should put their cultural and social capital to work to secure employment. In the past, graduates took a shared straight path, Path A, whose destination of public sector employment was known to all before departing along it. On Path A, there was little need for graduates to use their

capital creatively as the destination was known and shared. However, with the rules of the graduate labour market changing after 2014, graduates should now decide on their own individual path, Path B. Path B has unknown destinations and an unknown number of twists and turns along the way. Path B requires graduates to employ their cultural and social capital creatively and as Jalil says, "have the courage" to take. Courage to be independent, however, is not as simple as it sounds if your habitus is informed by dispositions of dependency.

Moreover, Raman and Jawan talk about the need for graduates to critically self-evaluate to improve themselves. On Path A, there is little need for graduates to do this. Their futures are assured once they reach their destination as public sector employment is for life and does not expire as a private sector employment contract does once it reaches it term. However, on Path B with its unknown destinations full of twists and turns, graduates must, as Jawan says, critically evaluate their performance and be reflexive (Bourdieu, 1977) to identify how they can improve. Furthermore, on Path B there is not necessarily a fixed destination because in the private sector, employment is characterised by contracts with expiration dates not by lifelong employment.

The call for graduates in the region to critically self-evaluate themselves is not beyond the boundaries of expected behaviour. However, when graduating from an education dominated by what Freire (1970/2014) calls the banking method, it is impractical to expect graduates to know how to engage in it. Moreover, self-evaluation requires the individual to see themselves as unfinished beings which is not a state of being congruent with the banking method (Freire, 1970/2014), which aspires for students to be filled completely with knowledge by their teacher.

5.2.3 Summary

Employability discourses say that individuals are responsible for their own employability, but HEIs should bear responsibility for equipping students with employability skills. The participants share these beliefs as per theme one. Safa describes public HEIs as printing machines, which until 2014 operated in isolation from the labour market, unconcerned about producing hireable graduates. To assist HEIs in fulfilling their responsibility towards their students and the private sector labour market, an IAB has recently been established in KRI to build bridges between HEIs and the private sector and as Alan says, to foster cooperation between the two. The view that individuals are responsible for their own employability is also upheld. Raman and Jawan say that this requires graduates to become critical examiners of themselves. A state of being that is problematic in as much as the current public education system in KRI relies on rote learning, which focuses on the completeness of individuals' knowledge.

The data also show that there is still a societal belief that the KRG should bear responsibility towards its graduates. This attitude is unsurprising considering the disposition of dependency that has been instilled into the collective habitus since the formation of the KRG in 1992 and because until 2014, thousands of publicly educated graduates were placed in public sector positions. The two education ministries, MoE and MHESR, are also identified as bearing responsibility for graduate employability along with the need for a coherent strategy towards employability to be implemented throughout all levels of education, which Rahand says is challenging due to KRI's political "duopoly" (Saleem & Skelton, 2019, p. 2).

5.3 Research question 3

How do stakeholders' policies, practices, and actions affect the employability of graduates in KRI?

5.3.1 Introduction

So far, we have explored why some graduates are more or less employable than others and which stakeholders are perceived to be responsible for graduate employability. This section focuses on how policies, practices, and actions of stakeholders external to the individual graduate themselves affect their employability. Theme five explores how the KRG's policies and practices negatively affect graduate employability. Theme six looks at how employers' practices positively affect graduate employability in the region, and theme seven explores how wasta as the seventh employability skill (see Table 5.1) affects graduates' employability.

5.3.2 Theme 5: The KRG's policies and practices negatively impact graduate employability

From the participants' responses, the policies and practices of the KRG are shown to create a moral panic on, and negatively impact, graduate employability. This theme is split into two sub-themes. The first explores how the KRG's policies have fostered a societal habitus characterised by dependency while the second investigates how the KRG's bureaucracy and centralisation impede institutional led reforms.

5.3.2.1 Sub-theme: The KRG's policies and practices have fostered a societal disposition of dependency

Through the adoption of rentierism as the system of governance, the lack of equalisation between the public and private sectors, and the way in which degree specialisations are assigned, the KRG fosters societal dependency on itself as provider.

5.3.2.1.1 Rentierism

Rentierism, the system of governance used by the KRG, according to Jalil, negatively affects graduate employability:

> All Iraq, including Kurdistan, is a rentier state. The government's ruling mentality is how to control the society and not how to develop it. Society is easy to control because you have money but when you face the crisis like we have, everything will collapse because you didn't develop people's abilities that could make some economic progress.

I interpret Jalil's comment to mean that the ruling rentier mentality is effectively withholding people's access to cultural capital by tempting them with economic capital instead. Bourdieu (1986) says that cultural capital is the most valuable source out of the three because it provides its bearers with a set of skills, knowledge, and dispositions that can allow them to succeed in various situations, or fields. Therefore, those who have cultural capital are more likely to succeed in life, both socially and economically. Moreover, cultural capital is a key mechanism for social reproduction as it can be passed down through generations from parents to children. By stopping people from amassing cultural capital by offering economic capital instead, the KRG can instil the disposition of dependency into society's habitus and subsequent generations more easily.

5.3.2.1.2 Equalisation

The lack of equalisation between the public and private sectors also impacts on graduate employability:

> There hasn't been employment in the public sector since the financial crisis, but still people don't want to work in the private sector. We have to equalise the private sector with the public to give an incentive to work there. (Raman)

Many graduates continue to hold out for public sector employment (MoP, 2016) despite the hiring freeze, reduced pay, and delayed salaries (Anaid, 2019; DeWeaver, 2015; Jayid et al., 2021). This is due in part because of a lack of equalisation between the

public and private sectors (MoP, 2016). This is to say that the public sector has more benefits than the private sector, such as paid holidays, shorter working hours, and the security of having a job for life (Hansen et al., 2014). Habitus must also be factored into individuals' preference for public sector work. Under Saddam Hussein, the region was a closed economy because of the double economic sanctions (Garner, 2013). The state was essentially the only viable employer and provider for all its citizens, the Kurds included (Natali, 2007). Even after KRI was carved out as a semi-autonomous region and the KRG created, the latter continued with the rentier style of governance. Therefore, the habitus of dependency is deeply ingrained into the fabric of society along with a mistrust of the private sector as something alien and unreliable.

Despite the public sector paying lower salaries than the private sector, the other non-cash benefits that are offered with public sector positions compensate for the lower earnings. Putting aside the fact that a public sector job is guaranteed for life, a public sector employee can expect to enjoy paid holidays, shorter working days, a pension, and even land to build on. In contrast, few private sector employees enjoy such benefits. Raman is hopeful that if the two sectors are equalised that will be enough incentive to persuade graduates to pursue their careers in the private sector. However, Jalil who also spoke about the financial crisis and the need to move from public to private sector employment is not as optimistic in the workforce's willingness to transition:

> When you pay the people and provide for their basic needs in life, they step-by-step lose their motivation to work.... Nowadays, we follow the news just to see when half of our salaries are coming, but, still, we do not want to work in the private sector and receive our full salary on time.

During Saddam Hussein's rule, KRI was under double sanctions, so most Kurds over a certain age have only experienced a closed market economy in which the state is the only viable employer. Society's reliance on the government to provide for them

became their habitus. In relative terms, KRI's open economy is only in its infancy, and the idea that working in the private sector is a viable career path is still less than a decade old from when the KRG implemented the public sector hiring freeze. Jalil says that people "lose their motivation to work". Framed through habitus, this could be interpreted as society internalising the disposition of dependency on the KRG to provide for them. Following this interpretation and understanding that habitus is enduring but not immoveable and considering the young demographics of KRI whose memories of a closed market will be only second-hand and not lived ones, it is possible that equalisation could in time shift society's attitudes and dispositions and, ultimately, its collective habitus to view the private sector as a favourable option.

5.3.2.1.3 Degree specialisation

Similar to how graduates of public HEIs, until 2014, were placed in public sector positions, graduates of public high schools are placed in degree specialisations. To recall, public HE applicants are assigned their degree specialisation based on their GPA from the grade 12 national exam. Carol outlines how this is problematic when graduates begin looking for a job:

> No one studies what they are interested in so because of this, no one applies for a job where they have the matching degree. For example, 60 percent of the people who apply for NGO jobs are engineers, which is not the degree subject you would expect. When we have job openings, we can already throw out 90 percent of the CVs as they don't match any of the qualifications that you asked for in the job description.

What Carol's comment demonstrates is graduates' limited understanding of how what they have studied translates into where they can work after they graduate. Because of past dependency on the KRG to provide employment for publicly educated graduates, their knowledge of how to play the game in the field of private sector recruitment is limited. Unlike in the public sector, the private sector matches a candidate's

qualifications, abilities, and attributes to the job description. If a graduate's parents have been working in the public sector, which is a highly likely possibility as almost 70 percent of the working age population work in the public sector (Khalid, 2021), then, a graduate will have been exposed, albeit, indirectly to public sector hiring policies and practices and have limited knowledge of the private sector recruitment process. Therefore, the concepts of a job description and the hiring process in the private sector are unknown to them. Their habitus is not aligned with this field and like 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) it is unlikely they will succeed. Graduates' limited knowledge of how to play the game vis-à-vis private sector recruitment was expressed by eight respondents (Carol, Dara, Dindar, Gohdar, Jalil, Jawan, Louie, and Safa) with Gohdar saying that:

> Students [from public HEIs] don't know how to write CVs. They don't know how-to knock-on companies' doors in the private sector. They don't know how to approach these companies for jobs.

Framed within Bourdieu's concepts, Gohdar's comment illustrates how some graduates in KRI lack cultural capital and that their habitus does not align with the field of private sector employment and its recruitment process.

5.3.2.2 Sub-theme: The KRG's bureaucracy and policy of centralisation impede institutional led reforms that could improve graduate employability

Characteristic of rentierism, governance in KRI's ministries is highly centralised and controlled. All the academics who were interviewed are frustrated with the levels of bureaucracy in the MHESR that hinder HEIs' attempts to introduce regional changes that could improve their graduates' employability:

> Universities need more freedom. They can operate better when they are independent and have the freedom to really decide about the curriculum. Because sometimes you want to change something, but government policy doesn't allow it. It has to go through the MHESR, and the bureaucratic process really makes it a challenge. Sometimes you

> want to do something, and it takes months so by the time you get approval to do it, it's too late. (Safa)

> We [public universities] lack the freedom because of the hierarchy of MHESR and Council of Ministers and so on. We need freedom for our university to do what our district needs. Because we are here to serve the people in our district first and foremost, we need to be able to respond to the what the market in this area needs. (Dindar)

Both Safa and Dindar are frustrated with being unable to develop their degree programmes at their respective public HEIs to align them with labour market needs. Dindar's frustration with the system is clearly felt below:

> Bureaucracy. Bureaucracy. Bureaucracy. The system, it's like this. [Dindar stands up and demonstrates how his hips and lower legs are fixed to the wall. He drops his wallet on the floor just in front of him.] It's like this wallet represents what you need to do. What you need to get approval for, so you should pick it up. Easy right? It's right there. But they don't mention that your hips should be attached here and that your legs should be attached here. When you are attached, you are not capable of picking up the wallet. This analogy shows you the difference between what the system claims and what the reality is.

Bureaucracy is a powerful tool used to reproduce social inequality and to maintain existing power relations (Bourdieu, 2014). Bureaucracies are rigid systems comprised of rules, procedures, and hierarchies that seek to regulate and control and to frustrate and thwart creativity, freedom, and agency of those who seek to create a more just and equitable society. By restricting HEIs' freedom to introduce changes that respond to the needs of their district as Dindar said, the political, centralised, and bureaucratic machinery is restricting students' access to valuable cultural capital by adhering to the use of mechanisms of social reproduction.

Jalil adds to Dindar's comment by saying that how out of the twenty-three departments at their HEI, in his opinion, "most should be closed" because their graduates cannot find jobs. Jalil continues:

> The problem is that our universities are separated from the market. We are teaching our students things that are not good for them, for their career. We have departments where it's very difficult for students to find jobs, such as pure science like math and physics. It's

> hard to close these departments because everyone wants to come to university. This pressure on the government made them open a lot of public universities.

Jalil's comment is particularly interesting because of Gohdar's explanation that the MHESR only gives approval for private HEIs to open departments that "meet the market needs". These government regulations appear to favour those who have sufficient economic capital to attend a private HEI and study a degree specialisation that is in demand in the labour market opposed to those who do not have the economic capital to study in a private HEI. The latter are resigned to play a game of roulette with their futures for in the public system students have little control over what degree specialisation they are assigned to, which is determined by their high school grade 12 GPA. It becomes a relative game of chance, based on their GPA, whether they study a degree in a department that fits market needs or not.

Multiple UN reports written on the Middle East (see Shatz et al., 2014, pp. 24-25) say that the skills gap is the result of poor investment in human capital. Jalil's comment supports this UN backed claim as some students in public HEIs invest four years of their time studying on a programme that they are placed in, according to their grade 12 GPA, for which there are no employment prospects after graduation with the cultural capital they have worked towards for four years. Because of the centralised system of governance, however, public HEIs are not able to close departments that offer their graduates no employment prospects. Jalil's comment also supports what Rahand said in the previous section about the need for greater cooperation between the MoE and MHESR to educate children on alternative pathways available after they graduate from high school.

5.3.3 Theme 6: (Some) Employers are willing to invest in local graduates

The RAND report says that 38 percent of medium-sized companies and 37 percent of large companies hire labour from outside of KRI because of a lack of skills and expertise within the local workforce. The support found in my data for these findings is limited as none of the employers that I interviewed expressed a preference for hiring foreigners when a suitable employee could be hired locally. Gohdar and Dara both said that international or large employers are compelled to hire foreign, skilled-labour due to a lack of it locally as this quote from Gohdar shows:

> I have been in contact with international employers, and they told me candidly that if we can find a real professional locally, why would we bring them from the UK or US, which is very costly. I'm not saying that we have no one suitable to work in these international companies but if you compare with the number of companies, there is not enough.

If we take the reason given for employers hiring foreigners by both Gohdar and Dara at face value, it is a pragmatic reason in as much as they say that it is because there is a lack of professional workers locally. Though neither Gohdar or Dara work in the private sector, Gohdar is a civil servant and Dara is a training provider, both said that they have good connections with the private sector as a part of their work and so are knowledgeable about employer perceived skills gaps. Neither of them, however, are recruiters in the private sector. The five participants, Chad, Carol, Elie, Louie, and Rachel, who work in the private sector and who are either in charge of recruitment at their organisations or are knowledgeable of recruitment procedures all said that their private sector companies hire locally whenever possible.

Chad said that he is one of a very small number of highly skilled expatriate workers at his company, which employs more than 6,000 workers. Chad's comments about the high localisation rate at his company are supported by William, who says that claims of 100 percent localisation by Chad's company are "yet never fully true; but not

far off". And also by Dindar and Jalil, with Jalil saying that Chad's company asks him to "just tell them [graduates] to come to our company". When asked why he thought that the company preferred to hire locals over foreigners, Chad said:

> My take on it is that there's a degree of pride in keeping the company Iraqi. They've achieved so much. They [the owner] are very proud of what they have achieved, and the fact that they have achieved it with an Iraqi team spurs them on to do that. Another element is that they are a traditional family business. Another reason is a very commercial one. Look at the cost of an expat versus the cost of a local employee.

Bourdieu's theories of capital and habitus help to explain the preference for hiring local workers where Chad works. By hiring local workers, the company that Chad works at is protecting its cultural capital by hiring workers in their own image (Boliver, 2017). Unlike in Boliver's (2017) study, where the organisational behaviour of hiring in their own image essentially discriminated against working class job applicants as they did not have the required stock of cultural capital. In Chad's company's case, the protection of their organisation's cultural capital can be regarded positively in as much as his organisation hires locally, including graduates, and does not discriminate, according to Chad, between tribal or ethnic affiliations. These distinctions are more relevant to KRI than Boliver's distinction between social classes, which is evident from Chad's reference to the company as being Iraqi rather than Kurdish. Another, more pragmatic reason given by Chad, and echoed by William, is connected to economic capital:

> Another reason is a very commercial one. The reason why he's so successful is that he's very cheap. If you look at the cost of an expat versus the cost of a local (Chad).
>
> They are the best example of what can be done [i.e. hiring locally] in the area. The head is so cheap, he will not pay anyone $5 a day more than necessary (William).

Local workers, generally, are cheaper than (Western) foreign workers. Employers are generally expected to cover the costs of flights, accommodation, and visa fees for Western workers, who are also usually paid higher salaries than local workers. In the oil

and gas sector specifically, which is where Chad works, local oil and gas engineers are paid on average a maximum of 2,290,000 IQD per month ("Petroleum engineer average salary in Iraq 2023", 2023; this roughly amounts to $1752 USD depending on the exchange rate, which in 2023 fluctuates almost daily in KRI). Compare this to oil and gas engineers' salaries in the USA, which average at $8,090 USD per month ("Petroleum engineer average salary in United States 2023", 2023).

Chad describes the company as a traditional family business and in a later part of his interview he explains:

> There's a value system, and it's not explicitly written down anywhere, but everybody who works for the company has the stamp of the [owner's] personality. … He has this tremendous loyalty from his staff and that permeates through our hiring system. Anyone who's hiring already has that set of values already themselves, so it translates. Generally, if somebody doesn't have those values, then, they're jettisoned pretty quickly.

From Chad's description of hiring practices, it appears that the company he works for has an organisational habitus that is driven by the owner of the company who strives to retain its family nature despite its size. As discussed in chapter three, Kurdish (and Iraqi) society is collectivist in nature and as such great loyalty is shown to family members. These traits are evident in the description given by Chad and offer an explanation as to why the owner chooses to limit the number of foreign workers, who most likely would not share the same habitus as local workers and so would be like 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Further evidence in support of companies hiring locally is given by Rachel, Carol, and Elie, who work in the education, NGO, and hospitality sectors, respectively. All three said that their organisations hire locally with a focus on training-up new recruits:

> When we hire people, we're hiring the best of what's available and with the intention of training because one of the things we are trying to do here is build capacity (Rachel).

> We have just one native speaker who teaches the upper levels but besides him, we have only local staff, who go through a lot of training (Carol).
>
> Of course we are focused on localisation. We want our hotels to be sustainable, which means we must hire locally and train our staff (Elie).

All three of the organisations where the participants work hire both foreign and local staff but as demonstrated in their comments, there is a commitment to hiring locally with the knowledge that local hires will require training to meet their organisations' standards. Moreover, Carol highlights that one struggle is sometimes finding suitably qualified graduates because "the degrees don't match the job market". For Carol, the cause of the issue lies in the fact that "there's jobs that we recruit for which didn't exist ten years ago, and there's no university here that teaches the qualifications for those".

These responses demonstrate employers' beliefs that local graduates may be lacking in cultural capital, such as a relevant degree and/or English language skills but that some companies are willing to invest in new recruits by training them up. In the RAND report, 20 percent of employers said that they invest in training. In the UNESCO report, a range between 29-82 percent of employers, depending on the sector, said that they have offered training in the past five years. The sample of the participants for this research is too small to make generalisations, but the responses do offer hope that since the RAND report was published, employer attitudes, in some sectors at least, are changing in relation to providing training as the UNESCO report shows. This finding amplifies two needs. First, an end to the bureaucracy that restricts individual HEIs from closing and opening departments according to labour market need. Second, for public HEIs to review their policies in relation to language studies because if we recall from the RAND report's findings, private sector companies are more likely to hire and train a

graduate who has the English language skills but who lacks a relevant degree specialisation.

In the RAND and UNESCO reports, there is a demonstrative concern that employers will continue to look outside KRI for highly skilled labour in the future. My data do not fully support this prediction because as Rachel, Carol, and Elie's comments show, there is employer support for training local staff and building capacity, which we can reason should eventually negate the need to hire outside of the region. However, not all the participants' companies are invested in training. Louie, who works for an oil and gas services company, said, "We can't afford to train staff. Our profitability margins are already very low". Because of the system of how the oil and gas services contracts are awarded, which is basically the company who tenders the cheapest quote wins (personal communication, William, 5th August 2020), it does not make financial sense for the company to invest in training programmes for what are short-term contracts. For oil and gas service companies to begin to invest in training local graduates, the tender system for contracts needs revising.

5.3.4 Theme 7: Wasta is the 'seventh' employability skill

The use of wasta has already been discussed as to why some graduates are more employable than others. Here, the use of wasta is discussed in relation to how it can affect employers' policies or practices in their recruitment processes. Two participants who work in the private sector indicated that the use of wasta affects the implementation of their regular policies and practices in recruitment, and a third participant described how wasta constitutes the regular recruitment policy at his organisation for some positions.

Rachel is very proud of the organisation where she works, and she has been actively involved in writing most of the policies and procedures covering all aspects of the organisation. I asked her about policies in place with regards to hiring:

> We have procedures according to the level the candidate is applying for. For graduates in grades seven, eight, and nine, we hire fresh graduates with a degree in the area they are applying for. We have a first interview done with HR (human resources). Then there's an academic test given to all candidates. Then the Head of Subject looks at their test. If they've done well enough, a second interview with the HoD is scheduled. The HoD looks at their experience if they have any and where they graduated from and their skills.

I then asked Rachel if there are any external factors that influence her organisation's hiring policies and she said:

> The iqama process here. There are some countries that cannot get residency here. [Rachel starts to laugh. What has been unsaid but understood refers to wasta] We don't necessarily always follow the procedures.

Rachel's laughter here indicates that the use of wasta at her organisation bypasses the formal policies and procedures for recruitment. In his interview, Louie recounted a similar story to that of Rachel's:

> We do have policies, written documents about the hiring process and approval processes, but the actual way we hire somebody is pretty open. Like how I found work.

Here, Louie is referring back to one of his opening comments made in his interview when I asked him to tell me about his experience of finding work in KRI. Louie described how he had essentially used his family's wasta to get each of his three jobs:

> The first company I worked for was a family friend's company…. Then my next job…. my mother knew the current country manager…. And the job that I have now is another family friend. … It was always through people that we knew.

Chad describes how at the organisation where he works, wasta is essentially the recruitment process but for lower-level jobs only:

> The lower-level jobs, the semi-skilled engineers, and technical people, are preferentially filled by people who work there already know. They need to have the proper skills to get

> the job, but they are known and trusted by people already within the company. But as soon as you get to any leadership role, even low-level leadership, it's done in a proper way against skills and CVs. Shortlists are made, and at this stage, it's never to do with family or tribal affiliation.

Chad's organisation openly uses wasta as a recruitment method. When asked if his organisation hires graduates, Chad said, "Oh, yeah, loads. Every year absolutely loads of them". Jalil, an academic practitioner in a public HEI, also mentioned separately that the organisation where Chad works actively recruits graduates from his university. This keenness for hiring and investing in local graduates by Chad's organisation illustrates the importance of students acquiring valuable social capital while in HE.

The subjugation of formal hiring policies and procedures to the use of wasta by employers in KRI can be explained using habitus. Wasta is a custom that is woven deep into the social fabric of Middle Eastern societies, KRI included. Wasta is an ingrained and enduring disposition that structures societal habitus and consequently organisational habitus. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that any proposed reforms will weaken the pervasiveness of the use of wasta in the recruitment process (see Egan & Tabar, 2016, for a Lebanese example).

5.3.5 Summary

The legacies of the rentier social contract are evident in the KRG's policies and practices and impact negatively on graduate employability. Through economic capital, the KRG has instilled the disposition of dependency into its citizenry, who view the KRG as their provider rather than their oppressor. Raman hopes that equalisation between the public and private sector in terms of pay and benefits will incentivise graduates to seek out employment in the latter. However, viewing the interrelated issues of dependency and oppression through Freire's (1970/2014) critical pedagogy, equalisation as a top-down strategy will not be enough to convince graduates, who

represent the oppressed, to move to the private sector. This is because, according to Freire, realisation of and liberation from the oppression must come from the oppressed themselves.

Because of the KRG's and its ministries' centralised bureaucracy, individual HEIs' abilities at implementing changes that could improve graduates' employability in the region are thwarted. From the responses of the participants who work at public HEIs, Dindar, Jalil, and Safa, it is clear that they are aware of their institutions' lacks in relation to producing hireable graduates and are similarly frustrated with the mechanism of bureaucracy that obstructs change.

In contrast to the KRG's negatively impacting policies and practices, employer practices as outlined by the participants are more favourable towards local graduates' employability. All the participants who represent private sector organisations said that their companies prefer to hire local workers whenever possible. And all, apart from Louie, said their organisations are prepared to invest in training them. Chad reports that his company, which has over 6,000 employees, takes pride in being Iraqi. So by hiring local workers, it can be reasoned that Chad's company is protecting its organisational cultural capital and habitus by hiring local workers whose habitus' align with the organisation's. This positive stance towards investing in locals upholds Boliver's (2017) contention that employers prefer to hire in their own image. However, in this context, it can be seen in part as a positive development as the employer's bias appears to work in the favour of local graduates. However, as theme two shows, employers favour graduates from private HEIs, the minority, over graduates from public HEIs, the majority, because the former group of graduates are perceived as possessing greater stocks of cultural capital, which includes language and technology skills.

Finally, the data confirm wasta as being the seventh 'skill' that a graduate should possess to successfully gain employment. Participants concede that the possession of wasta supersedes their organisations' formal and procedural recruitment processes and practices. Therefore, amassing stocks of social capital, which is to say, the skill of acquiring and using wasta, while at university is important and should be prioritised alongside developing cultural capital and developing language and technology skills. As wasta has been shown to trump the other six skills and attributes shown in Table 5.1 from theme 1, this shows that the assumption that recruitment is played on a level field is a fallacy.

5.4 Research question 4

How can HEIs improve their students' employability throughout their undergraduate programmes of study?

5.4.1 Introduction

The traditional raison d'être for HEIs in not only KRI but federal Iraq was to produce workers for the public sector. This was partly attributable to the rentier model that both federal Iraq and KRI pursued (and continue to do so) due not only to the large oil rents both governments command but also because of the economic sanctions that were imposed on the whole of Iraq until 2003 resulting in Iraq's closed and centralised economy (Garner, 2013). Russell (1916) describes the purpose of education as "almost always, in some form, the maintenance of the existing order" (p. 751). The HE system in KRI pre-2014 fulfilled its part of maintaining the existing order by holding workers and delaying their entry into the public sector. However, the economic crises that began in KRI in 2014 rocked the existing order. The social contract, characteristic of rentier states and which is made between the state's ruling entity and its citizens, became

untenable in KRI as the KRG no longer had the funds to continue to pay public sector wages and accompanying benefits (DeWeaver, 2015). For the first time in the KRG's history, graduates had the reality that the social contract is finished lain bare to them. KRG official rhetoric is that jobseekers, graduate or otherwise, must find their way in the private sector ("Untapped Resource", 2014). In a short space of time, the existing order that HEIs had helped to maintain had been remodelled. The remodelled purpose of HEIs became the production of hireable graduates who can successfully meet the needs of the private sector labour market. In this section, three areas of reform in the provision of HE, namely pedagogy, internships, and degree programmes are put forward to improve graduate employability in the region.

5.4.2 Theme 8: Pedagogy in public HEIs nurtures "limited" minds

Pedagogy most commonly refers to the methodologies of teaching. However, for the basis of this chapter, pedagogy represents a trinity of curriculum, methodologies, and teachers. Two sub-themes related to curricula, and teaching staff and methodologies are discussed in relation to the limiting nature of pedagogy in KRI's public HEIs.

5.4.2.1 Sub-theme: Public HE curricula do not adequately prepare students for life after graduation

The inadequacy of curricula taught in public HEIs was highlighted by all participants. From Gohdar's comment below, it appears that 2014 served as the catalyst for the need for curriculum development in KRI:

> In 2014, when ISIS started, we realised there is a big skills gap, so the government and Ministry of Higher Education needed to figure out how we can fit our youth into the labour market, so we started working on the curriculum development.

However, Professor Ala'Aldeen, who was appointed as Minister of MHESR between 2009 to 2012, drafted a policy document, *A Roadmap to Quality* (MHESR, 2010), outlining sweeping HE reforms that reportedly gained swift support and endorsement from the KRG's cabinet at that time (Garner, 2013). Ala'Aldeen's roadmap called for modernising the curricula to suit the needs of the labour market, to enhance the abilities of HE students, and finally, to "encourage students to think" (MHESR, 2010, p.16) and become independent and creative learners. Despite the cabinet supporting the policies, Ala'Aldeen faced a hostile reaction to his proposed reforms from students, teachers' unions, and private HEIs (Garner, 2013). Therefore, it is unsurprising that little progress has been made in curriculum development up until today despite redoubled efforts made in 2014 as indicated by Gohdar.

Another reform that Ala'Aldeen unsuccessfully pursued during his ministerial tenure was to decentralise HEIs (MHESR, 2010), to make them independent, and to consequently give individual HEIs the ability to improve their academic quality. As the previous section and Safa's comment below shows, this reform is yet to be realised:

> I can't say there's been much curriculum development coming from the university…. Another challenge is for the government to give freedom to the universities to decide on the curriculum.

Safa says that the provision of public HE and its curricula are still highly centralised. In short, both are controlled by the government. In a public address made in 2019, the president of KRI, Nechivan Barzani, said, "A university has to graduate a student who the job market awaits and needs, not one who will look for a job but fail to find it" (Dri, 2019, para. 2). The rhetoric of this comment is that it is the responsibility of HEIs to produce graduates that can be successful in the private sector. However, as public HE and its curricula are still so highly centralised and controlled by the government, are the

'hands' of HEIs not bound too tightly to enact the reforms needed to fulfil the president's demand? Through their dependence on the government for their survival (Qasim, Al-Askari, Massoud & Ayoubi, 2021) and their, to borrow Freire's (1970/2014) term, domestication, HEIs are currently unable to make changes to, inter alia, their governance, structure, and curricula (MHESR, 2010). At the 2021 conference on education held in Duhok, the current Minister of the MHESR, Aram Qadir, introduced a committee whose purpose is to review HE laws and to implement a law that would finally fulfil Ala'Aldeen's vision and "grant financial, scientific, and academic independence to the universities in Kurdistan Region" ("Ministers", 2021) and which could enable them to fulfil the president's appeal made in 2019.

Russell (1916), who pre-dates Freire's (1970/2014) same sentiment by roughly 50 years, warns, "Education should not aim at a dead awareness of static facts, but at an activity directed toward the world that our efforts are to create" (p. 757). Learning 'static' facts may have equalled a passable education when HEIs were producing graduates for KRI's public sector. However, as Atrushi and Woodfield (2018) point out, the private sector requires different skills to the public sector; therefore, HE needs improvement. Carol's comment below indicates that the learning of static facts appears to continue to predominate in KRI's public HEIs. Moreover, the facts learned during a student's four years at university seemingly have no relevance to their graduate selves and are soon forgotten:

> Feedback we get from our students is that the whole curriculum in public universities is just based on learning some facts without thinking about them. They take the exam. Then it's fine. They can forget them.

Filling students with facts that are detached from the learner's reality is what Freire (1970/2014) warns his readers about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In such a

classroom, the teacher narrates while students passively listen and note down the facts given to them. In this learning situation, it is unsurprising that employers complain of a lack of skills in graduates as their university experience has failed to expose to them to the realities of the post-university world and to the skills that their graduate-selves need.

Dara, who works for a local training provider, shared his dissatisfaction with the quality of graduates from public HEIs highlighting the poor academic knowledge learned while at university. In addition, Dara says that due to the purely theoretical and lecture-based nature of the curriculum, graduates leave with no practical experience:

> I am sorry to say that their education is very low [when talking about graduates from public universities in KRI]. I am not satisfied with their experience and knowledge. Universities should focus more on the practical side not only the theoretical in order to graduate experienced people.

At the 2021 conference on education held in Duhok, the theoretical nature of the curriculum was also criticised by the Minister of the MoE, Alan Saeed. Speaking in relation to the need for the education system to meet the needs of the labour market, Minister Saeed was reported as saying, "Our education system is mostly about theoretical curriculums, with a very small number of practical lessons. We need to work on paying more attention to practical lessons" ("Ministers", 2021).

Participants working at various levels within the public sector point to entrepreneurship as a solution to graduate unemployment. However, as Jalil points out, neither business nor entrepreneurship is taught at university outside of business and affiliated degrees:

> One of the very best reasons for having huge unemployment here is that the universities, the entire higher education system, is not teaching the basics of business.

Entrepreneurship education involves students identifying and assessing the merits of opportunities and challenges (Seelig, 2017). Skills associated with entrepreneurs include being creative and innovative, problem-solving, independent, and adept at communication, which are all skills that are coincidently sought after by employers. Therefore, by including entrepreneurship education, HEIs can prepare their graduates for two different paths, being self-employed or being an employee. An additional twofold benefit of entrepreneurship education is that when graduates decide to become entrepreneurs, the graduate unemployment rate decreases, and the weak and underdeveloped private sector is strengthened and diversified.

5.4.2.2 Sub-theme: There is a lack of confidence in the abilities of local teaching staff and how they teach

Pedagogy in KRI is described as outdated and inadequate to meet the needs of the labour market (Atrushi & Woodfield, 2018; Maneshi, 2019). The RAND and UNESCO reports say that private employers in the region complain of a skills shortage among the region's graduates. Moreover, in Atrushi and Woodfield's (2018) study on the quality of HE in KRI, only 13.2% of respondents, made up of both teaching staff and leaders from public HEIs, said they are satisfied with the quality of public HE provision in the region. Just 17.8 percent of respondents in Atrushi and Woodfield's research believe that teaching staff are prepared well in terms of subject knowledge and in their capabilities to engage students in constructivist learning.

Dindar comments on the professional difference between teaching staff who studied locally and those who studied abroad and the effect that this has on students:

> Most of our staff are in their late thirties and early forties. They have managed to travel to the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe to see how the system works there. This has had a tremendous effect on how the lecturers teach the students and the learning environment here.

Dindar completed his doctoral studies in Europe as a part of the Human Capacity and Development Programme (HCDP), which could explain his support for teaching staff who have studied abroad. Particularly because the HCDP was put on hold in 2015 (Education USA, n.d.) because of the onset of the financial crises, this could be an indirect attempt at conveying the worth of the programme. Dindar continued by explaining his perceptions of the effects of having teaching staff who have studied abroad on the learning environment of the university and on the enhanced capabilities of their graduates to interact confidently with private sector businesses:

> The university here is established under some unlimited environment of freedom, so the students are somehow free to communicate with and question the teachers. This sphere of communication made the students more vibrant in the private sector and more daring to come to the stage. Unlike in the rest of the public universities, students have some extent of freedom to express themselves in the class.

Freire (1970/2014) describes teachers and learners in the banking system of learning as existing in duality. That is to say that the teacher has all the knowledge, and the learner has “absolute ignorance” (Freire, 1970/2014, p.74). It is this state that the teacher reinforces in their classroom, of knower and un-knower. In this situation, communication is decidedly unidirectional from teacher to learner, knower to un-knower because what of value could the latter in their state of ignorance possibly contribute? The comment made by Dindar demonstrates that in his public HEI teachers and learners are not considered to be polar opposites. That the voice and contribution of learners is valued. Moreover, that by giving voice to learners in the classroom, learners are more confident in themselves and better communicators. Confidence and communication being two skills that are valued by the private sector. The learning relationship between teachers and students described by Dindar stands in stark contrast to how Bilal, who works at the MHESR, says he considers the teaching

relationship, "Teachers need to transfer their ideas to students. I know my job best and I don't need anyone telling me how to do it". Bilal's comment shows how for him the teacher and students do exist in duality to each other with the teacher being responsible for transferring their ideas to the students.

Bilal's perception of how he conceives the relationship to be between teacher and student provides a useful comparative with which to frame Kamal and Kara's distinctions made between the quality of local and foreign teaching staff. Kamal and Kara both demonstrate a strong preference for the latter. Both Kamal and Kara work for a private university that markets itself as being superior to other universities in the region in part because of its international academic staff, which could act as a basis for bias in their comments:

> I cannot say this is one hundred percent true but while one person studies in the Kurdistan Region, their mind is, as you say, very limited. But, for example, when you bring international staff, their minds are brighter. This is a reality, actually. It's not in my hand (Kamal).
>
> International lecturers are more friendly than our [Kurdish] lecturers with the students. You know, when you become friendly with your students, you can more easily share your information with them. Their [international lecturers] teaching style is better. (Kara)

Dindar also says there is a distinction between those who travelled abroad to study and local teaching staff who Dindar says have questionable disciplinary knowledge in the field they are teaching:

> Some lecturers who didn't travel to study are teaching students subjects that they themselves are not very good at. I want to teach reservoir engineering to the students of petroleum engineering so for this reservoir engineering, it would be best if I had ten years of experience with some oil company in this field, but this is not the case here. Another example, I am teaching English Literature to the students, but I haven't even read fifty novels in English. I've read two, three, or five novels. Our lecturers, they have MSc, Ph.D.. Then they directly tell the students what their [laughs] own perceptions are, and most of their perceptions are not right.

The lack of teaching staff's disciplinary knowledge or experience in their field could be attributed to two causes. To take Dindar's example of lecturers of engineering subjects, the salaries of teachers in public HEIs are low when compared to the salaries that engineers in the field earn. Therefore, it is unlikely that an engineer who has ten years of field experience would forsake their earning potential to transition to the [public] HE sector. Moreover, public HEI teaching staff, like their non-teaching public sector counterparts, once recruited have their job for life. In such a system, arguably, there is little impetus to engage with continuous professional development (CPD). Moreover, to engage with CPD is acknowledgement that as an individual, you are an unfinished being, which, to recall, is a not a state of being in congruency with the banking method (Freire, 1970/2014) that many, if not the majority, of the region's teaching staff would likely have experienced at school. Therefore, engaging with CPD and acknowledging that you are 'unfinished' is in conflict with the teaching staff's habitus.

Earlier, the curriculum was criticised for being too theoretical and lacking a practical element. Safa makes a similar comment about the teaching methodology with criticism being directed towards the lecture-style of teaching when he says, "The teaching doesn't really enhance the skills of students for the private sector because it's mostly lecture based with a focus on memorising facts". Safa's observation is unsurprising given that the traditional form of teaching and learning in the region is rote-learning. In an interview, the former minister of MHESR, Professor Ala'Aldeen, recalls that when trying to introduce his HE reforms he faced "deeply entrenched interests, people, institutions and long stagnant cultures" (Garner, 2013, para. 4). The deep traditional cultural and religious roots that rote learning has in the region's culture and collective habitus could explain its persistent use. Research done in Bahrain, which

shares a similar learning environment to KRI, shows that educational reforms even if endorsed by and turned into policy by the government, will fail if the wider society, that is to say, the learners and their families, and teachers do not support the reforms (Hayes et al., 2015).

Bourdieu's concept of habitus offers a useful framework for explaining the resistance towards pedagogic reform in KRI. Habitus is made up of "lasting, transposable dispositions" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.10). The most lasting dispositions are made in early childhood instilled in children by their family and then at school. Bourdieu (1977) explains how these earliest dispositions are what our primary habitus is formed on and are difficult to reverse. The primary habitus is of significance as this provides the stimulation and/or limitation of all future habitus formations. In essence, what Bourdieu is saying is that our primary habitus informs and directs the actions of our older selves. Therefore, if our primary habitus is based on rote learning, it will take great effort and cognitive discomfort to develop a new habitus to counter rote learning. It is, however, possible as habitus "is durable but not eternal" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.133).

Pedagogy is a social theory (Freire, 1970/2014) and thus is a tool that forms our societies and directs how they and the people in them function. This understanding was echoed by the Prime Minister of KRI, Masrour Barzani, in a public address he made in 2021 marking the 59th anniversary of the establishment of the Kurdistan Teachers Union (KTU). He said that the KTU "has played a critical role not just in educating generations of bright and curious minds, but in promoting and defending the rights of the Kurdish people, its culture and its language" (Gov.KRD, 2021). The right to work is enshrined in article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of which Iraq has

been a signatory since 1975. The article begins, “We all have the right to employment, to be free to choose our work, and to be paid a fair salary that allows us to live and support our family….” (Amnesty International, 2023). If Freire were still alive, he would very likely argue that pedagogy in its present state in KRI does not defend the rights of the Kurdish people to be employed and in fact is domesticating not educating them to fatalistically accept their situation. By continuing to adhere to the methodology of rote-learning, pedagogy is, first, perpetuating the culture of silence within KRI by maintaining the status quo. Second, by disabling the abilities graduates need to be successfully employed in the private sector. Third, by assigning students to their degree specialisation (see research question three), they are limiting their access to their right to be free to choose their own work.

In the old order when the KRG could fulfil its side of the social contract and HEIs fulfilled their roles as waiting rooms for public sector employment (Romani, 2009), Freire’s (1970/2014) banking model, arguably, was fit for purpose. Freire explains how in the banking model the teacher is responsible for regulating how reality is fed to and processed by the learners. Their role is to ensure that learners are able to assimilate into society passively and unquestioningly. That is to say that learners should unquestioningly accept their lot within the boundaries of the social contract. However, with the remodelling of the existing order, no longer can the learners be expected to passively accept the reality being fed to them. HEIs must unshackle themselves from their role of waiting rooms in the old order and look towards their new role as enablers of both teachers and learners searching together for knowledge and questioning their realities and the status quo.

5.4.2.3 Summary

There is a lack of confidence in the abilities of local teaching staff and in how they teach. A clear distinction was made between the abilities of international teaching staff and of local staff who have studied or worked abroad in opposition to local teaching staff who have not travelled abroad for work or study. It is likely to be the latter of these groups who Professor Ala'Aldeen referred to as having "entrenched interests [and a] stagnant culture" (Garner, 2013, para. 4) that stands in opposition to HE reform. Viewing this culture through the theoretical lens of habitus lends hope to the possibility of reforming it whilst acknowledging the uncertainty of accomplishing such reform.

HE curricula fails to prepare employable graduates as it is outdated and focuses on the transmission of facts without incorporating a practical element. Moreover, due to the centralized HE system, HEIs in the region are unable to independently develop or reform their curricula.

5.4.3 Theme 9: As a "tick the box" exercise, the internship programme is not fulfilling its learning potential

Theme nine is broken down into three sub-themes. The first sub-theme is recognition of the instrumental value of internships. The second sub-theme is the internship programme in its present state is a box ticking exercise. The third sub-theme is the internship programme needs greater private sector involvement to fulfil its learning potential.

5.4.3.1 Sub-theme: Internships are recognised for their instrumental value of gaining work experience and networking

The participants recognise the instrumental value of internships as an opportunity to gain work experience and network. All students in KRI must complete an internship to graduate, which in theory should equip every graduate with some, albeit, limited work experience. However, because the majority of internships are done in the public sector, their instrumental value is undermined as Gohdar's comment illustrates:

> Graduates have not been interned in the private sector, so they are real fresh. … If you are a part of the real work atmosphere, you will get a much better experience.

Gohdar's comment highlights graduates' lack of job-preparedness when he describes them as "real fresh", which is not a condition unique to KRI's graduates. However, what is more unique to the region is that internships are mostly done in the public sector, which is a condition that Gohdar says is responsible, at least in part, for graduates' lack of job-preparedness for the private sector. Atrushi and Woodfield (2018) point out that the skills in demand by private sector employers are dissimilar to skills needed to work in the public sector. It becomes clear that for internships to fulfil their instrumental value, they should be done in the private sector. Moreover, doing internships in the public sector strengthens societal habitus and its dependency in relation to graduates being placed in public sector positions, which is counterproductive to the KRG's public sector hiring freeze and in transforming societal habitus away from its dispositions of dependency.

As the value of degrees decreases, Bourdieu contends that the value of social capital, or wasta in KRI's context, increases (Costa, Burke, & Murphy, 2019). Internships, therefore, present a valuable opportunity for students to network and make

connections to use after graduation to secure employment (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). An understanding of this is demonstrated in the two comments below:

> My experience tells me that those who have done an internship in the private sector, a good number of them have been hired by the private sector, because that's the nature of the human being. From the first time I saw you, I'm just like, hi, Victoria, but the next time I see you, it is different. (Gohdar)
>
> For example, I did my internship with Carrefour. When I finished university, they directly said to me, if you want, you can work with us. Because I did my internship at Carrefour, they know me, and they asked me to go there. (Kara)

Neither of these comments mention that connections are made based on the performance of interns. Rather, both say that employment is offered simply due to the graduates being known to the employer. This behaviour is explained by Moreau and Leathwood (2006) who stress that recruitment is a social event that is not rational and is tainted by human bias or as Gohdar says, by "the nature of the human being". Internships can provide an opportunity for students who have limited wasta to acquire valuable social capital that they can use in the graduate labour market.

Networking is known locally as wasta. Even though wasta does not directly translate to networking, the idea of networking as establishing connections for your personal employment gain would be considered as a form of wasta. Ramady (2016) establishes wasta as the capability of being able to influence others to secure personal interests. It was not until the economic crises that began in 2014 that the KRG initiated the downsizing of the public sector (Ibrahim, 2019). Until this time, it had been widely expected that upon graduation there would be public sector jobs for thousands of graduates of public HEIs (Ibrahim, 2019). In this context, it could be considered normal for students to do their internship in the public sector with the expectation that through making connections, or gaining *wasta*, in the department that they interned in, they would be placed there after finishing their studies. With the KRG's focus on downsizing

the public sector, graduates are being directed to the private sector (MoP, 2013). However, sociocultural mores and strong family ties prevalent in KRI can make securing work in the private sector challenging without having first established some kind of connection or wasta:

> Sometimes employers are not accepting jobseekers. I can say one of the reasons is the traditional social problem. They would like to use their family members. They would like to hire people who they already know, because they are thinking that this person is coming inside the company, maybe, they are stealing the information…. That's why they prefer to hire their family member rather than a new person they've never met before. (Dara)

Wasta has been established as an employability skill in KRI in theme seven. For those students who do not possess it, participating on the internship program could help them develop this 'skill' by making valuable connections.

5.4.3.2 Sub-theme: Stakeholders consider the internship programme to be a 'box ticking' exercise

The unstructured and unsupervised nature of the internship programme is an issue raised in the data. Eames and Coll (2010) state that a well-designed and supervised internship program is a necessity if students' learning from the classroom and workplace is to be optimally integrated. However, Jawan describes the internship programme simply as a "tick in the box" exercise, which must be done to be able to graduate. Other participants support Jawan's opinion and outline how students may not attend, may falsify reports, or simply go 'work' in their family company to tick the box:

> Students wouldn't even go there when their internship is in the public [sector]. They would just say they have done their summer training. (Safa) [Students consider it a box ticking exercise.]

> For example, I have some friends. They study in the public university. Their university just lets them organise everything and when they finish they [the students] just give the university their records without the university checking them (Kara) [HEI considers it a box ticking exercise.]

> I would not consider it to be like a professional internship if you just spent some time at the company of your uncle. (Carol) [Employer considers it a box ticking exercise.]

The level of student engagement with the internship programme that Safa and Kara's comments reveal is wanting and is not dissimilar to the poor work ethic of public sector workers as described in a report on private sector development and civil-service reform written for the MoP (Hansen et al., 2014). In the report, moral hazard, which is where employees are able to go undetected in avoiding responsibility towards their work, is identified as a large part of the problem. Moral hazard in the public sector is fuelled by public sector employment not being linked to performance objectives and incentives, and the security in knowledge that their public sector job is a job for life regardless of their performance (Hansen et al., 2014). In the internship programme, students' moral hazard could be fuelled by a combination of the lack of structure and supervision in the programme and by a disbelief that they will have to find work in the private sector after graduation.

In contrast to how the internships are managed in public HEIs, Kamal and Kara, who both work at a private HEI, said that the internship programme is managed differently by their institution:

> Of course, we are recording their attendance, the reports. What did they learn from the company? They have to explain it all, and they have to write a report about their two months. During the internship, we are focusing on the student making a good contact and impression at that company. But the internship depends on the university. For example, we at the career centre follow-up on the student in the company every week. We check if the student is attending their internship or not. (Kamal)

From Kamal's comment, it is evident that internships, which are done in the private sector, are not considered a box ticking exercise by their private HEI. However, what appears to still be lacking in Kamal's response is the value of internships as a process of learning through integrating the theory learned in the classroom with the practical experience of the internship placement. It appears that the classroom and work

placement are thought of as two discrete learning spaces. From Kamal's comment, we can see that students should report what they learned on the placement, but there is no mention of how students reflect on how they integrated and applied the knowledge they learned in the classroom to the workplace.

5.4.3.3 Sub-theme: Greater involvement of private sector employers is needed

Only one participant who represents private sector employers said that their company offers an internship program. Elie said, "We have communications with universities to offer training during summer to get experience. The future of our business is in localisation of the workforce". However, the remaining participants representing private sector employers said that their organisations do not offer internship programs. Carol, who works for an international NGO, simply said, "No", when asked if her organisation offered an internship program. Then later added, speaking generally about KRI, "I think there's very limited internship opportunities". At Carol's organisation, almost entirely only local candidates are recruited to teach English (there is just one native English speaker teacher), and they undergo an initial "six months training". Putting interns through an initial six-month training period would be unfeasible when the duration of internships in KRI is only one hundred hours. Similarly, William, who is a consultant for a government ministry, said that international oil companies are not interested in training or developing engineers in the region and that "their hands would need to be forced to do so".

Collaboration between HEIs and private sector employers over internships could in time develop to become what Rivera (2015, p. 271) calls a "symbiotic relationship… [where each provides] one another with valuable resources". HEIs produce job-ready graduates and the private sector provides not only curriculum input but also, as Rivera outlines, bestows prestige on HEIs by favouring and recruiting their graduates.

However, it is questionable to what greater extent private sector involvement in the internship program can realistically happen in KRI. In 2016, only twenty percent of salaried jobs were in the private sector (Anthony et al., 2015), which raises the question of whether the private sector has the capacity to accommodate the number of HE interns. Events that have happened since 2016, including the Kurdish referendum for independence, oil price crash, various internal security threats, and the COVID-19 pandemic have continued to exasperate efforts to develop the private sector, which remains underdeveloped and small (Wahab, 2020). Consequently, it becomes questionable whether the private sector in KRI can bear the financial cost of training and mentoring interns.

Moreover, as the workplace environment impacts significantly on the quality of learning experience for the intern, employers need to be assessed in their suitability and ability to offer internships and regulated in their provision of them. Smith (2012) says that the workplace must demand cognitive engagement from students if they are to apply their theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom and get the most out of the experience. However, Safa says, “The internship programme is still a challenge. Still, there are no rules and regulations for the companies or the universities about their provision”. If internships in the private sector are not structured and regulated, students’ potential for generating valuable cultural and social capital is diminished.

At the time that this data were collected, participants representing public HEIs and the MHESR said that the DPM’s office had taken on the task of reforming the internship programme and to encourage private sector involvement in it:

> Internships are now centrally governed by the Deputy Prime Minister. This internship is the same for the entire region. The students apply online. First, they should create their profiles, their CVs. Then they search for vacancies, and they can see which companies are advertising available internship positions and so on. They apply for these internship positions and upon the accomplishment of their internship period they get a special certificate directly from the Deputy Prime Minister. (Safa)

In 2020, the KRG Internship Program website that Safa speaks of was live, and it appeared that the internship application process for the private sector had been moved online and was done in English (see Appendix E for screenshots of the website taken from a public HEI's website and Appendix F for KRG Internship's Facebook page). The website listed an impressive number of private sector employer partners, which posted their internship vacancies on the website. However, in 2023 the KRG Internship website can no longer be found online (see Appendices G and H for examples of error messages), so the present condition of the internship programme is unknown.

5.4.3.4 Summary

While the participants recognise the instrumental value of internships for gaining work experience and networking, what is lacking is a recognition of the need for internships to integrate the theory learned in the classroom into the workplace to provide an optimal learning experience. Despite recognising the value of internships as an opportunity to acquire possession of valued cultural and social capital, in their present state, internships done by students in public HEIs are regarded by various stakeholders as a box ticking exercise. Something that must be done to graduate rather than being seen as a valuable learning experience. The ambivalence shown towards internships could be attributed to moral hazard. Due to a lack of structure and supervision in the internship programme, students are able to shirk their responsibilities. Moreover, societal habitus, characterised by dependency on the KRG, supports a belief that the KRG will provide for them after graduation and renders the internship as nothing more than a box ticking exercise. Kamal and Kara said that in their private HEI, internships are not a box ticking exercise, which could be because they are done in the private sector and so greater workplace demands are made of the interns.

Greater private sector employer involvement could be the primary reform that is needed to transform the internship programme from a box ticking exercise into a worthwhile integrated learning experience.

5.4.4 Theme 10: Degree specialisations offered by public HEIs are turning the institutions into "machines creating youth unemployment"

All the participants described how HEIs in the region are not producing hireable graduates in terms of not only lacking soft skills as per the RAND and UNESCO reports but also in terms of academic credentials being outdated and irrelevant in the labour market. Carol says:

> The degrees you study at university don't match the job market. No country needs 50 percent engineers. And when it comes to modern branches of education for jobs that didn't exist ten years ago, it's very hard for these companies to find people to work for them, because there's no institution that teaches that here.

Speaking about his past role as a HR officer for a NGO, Louie recounts the time when he was asked to find 20 social workers:

> I said, "You're not going to find twenty social workers around here. There's no social work degree or training, so let's hire 20 people who seem like they have a good work ethic, speak English and Kurdish, and you bring them in, and you train them". We did that, and it worked out well.

The solution, according to Dindar, is for academia in the region to be reformed to meet labour market needs and to begin producing hireable graduates:

> We have 31 public and private universities which have almost become machines creating youth unemployment in this region, so we need to reform academia to start filling in the gaps. And how can we achieve this? By technical vocational education and training, TVET. Universities should focus on this concept and make themselves more technical based and in those areas and fields that the market really needs. To stop becoming machines creating unemployment this is what's needed, because it's the cultural norm here to raise your child to have a university degree.

Dindar suggests that HEIs in the region need to change their focus and offer more technical degrees if they are to avoid becoming "machines creating youth unemployment". There are HE colleges that offer four-year TVET degrees in KRI but as outlined in chapter three, it is high school graduates with the lowest GPAs that are assigned places at these colleges, which works to devalue these degrees. Culturally, as Dindar says, families do want their children to get a degree, but they do not want their children to attend these technical colleges as they are not perceived as high status enough. Dindar's comment emphasises the cultural expectation also raised in chapter three that young people in KRI go to university and get a degree in the highest status profession that their grade 12 GPA, or their economic capital, can get them entry into (UNESCO, 2019).

Coming from KRI himself, Dindar has first-hand experience and knowledge of the cultural pressures young people are put under. It could be his understanding of societal habitus that causes Dindar to suggest that it is HEIs that should change their focus to accommodate society's expectations for their youth. In chapter three in the section on education, we saw that education was weaponised against the Kurds during Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, so it is understandable that dispositions that encourage education inform the collective societal habitus. Education is regarded as a tool that ensures the growth and survival of a people and its culture, so should the desire to equip your child with this tool be discouraged? Or could Dindar's suggestion be implemented, which could offer a solution to the cultural desire to send children to university and to halt Dindar's impending doom of HEIs becoming machines creating youth unemployment?

Jalil agrees with Dindar that many degree specialisations on offer at public HEIs are irrelevant in the private sector labour market and contribute to graduate unemployment:

> In our university, we have 23 departments. In my opinion, we should close most of these departments, because there's no jobs for those who graduate from these departments. This is a huge problem for the city, for the politicians, for everyone. It's hard to close these departments because everyone wants to come to university. It's this pressure to come to university that caused the government to open a lot of public universities.

Like Dindar, Jalil is well aware of the societal expectation that youth should go to university. Jalil's comment also shows that the government is aware of its role to fulfil its side of the social contract by providing free education for all. The societal expectation for its children to get a degree as described by Dindar and Jalil can be explained by Foster (1965) who reasons that when the biggest employer is the public sector, then, an academic degree equals a vocational qualification in as much as it prepares you to get a job. For this societal reasoning to be undone, societal habitus needs to be transformed in relation to dependency on the KRG as provider.

The need for a change of focus for HEIs towards TVET as suggested by Dindar is supported in a comment made by Dara. Dara works for a vocational training provider in Erbil, and he said that a large number of people that come to his training agency are graduates from KRI's largest public HEI:

> Most of the participants who attend our courses graduated from Salaheddin University, and their education is very low. They don't know about the computer. They don't speak Arabic or English. It's difficult for us to prepare them in two or three weeks. They need long term training. For me, personally, I am not satisfied with their experience or knowledge. … Those who graduated from the College of Engineering, Electricity Department, came to our training centre. We ask them to install one socket or one switch, one plug, and they say, "I cannot do that". This is the common reply from these graduates. (Dara).

If Dindar's suggestion is implemented, these graduates, who Dara says are from the largest HEI in KRI, would not need to enrol at a vocational training provider to upskill themselves after graduation. Instead of having to invest further time to accumulate cultural capital after finishing their formal education, they could graduate already in possession of it.

From an employer's perspective, Louie is frustrated at the lack of local technical expertise available:

> We need electrical and mechanical technicians. The only way Kurds can get these jobs is if they start as a helper guy, who's shovelling dirt. Then slowly, the employer sees they're competent, so then he can start learning to do some wiring stuff. Then he can do termination. That's the only way I've seen Kurds become technicians. There's no schools that I'm aware of that teach these skills.

Louie is talking about his own experience of hiring mechanical and electrical technicians for an oil and gas service company, which depending on the economy can employ up to 500 workers. Louie's comment supports the call for HEIs to have a greater technical focus and for practical elements to be implemented alongside the teaching of theory. For if graduates of electrical and mechanical programmes are graduating after four years without the necessary cultural capital and are consequently labelled as incompetent by employers and have to begin by "shovelling dirt", reform is clearly needed.

5.4.4.1 Summary

Dindar, Jalil, Dara, and Louie's comments show that there is a clear need for public HEIs to reform the degrees they offer to have relevancy in the private sector labour market. The degrees offered may have been suitable for the pre-2014 raison d'être of public HEIs as producing workers for the public sector but as the comments in this section reflect, they are no longer relevant in the new post-2014 order. Dindar's call

for a greater focus on TVET in HE could graduate individuals with relevant qualifications as well as fulfil societal desire for HE.

5.4.5 Summary

The HE system in KRI is relatively young being that the region only came into self-governing status in 1992. The education system that it inherited from old-Iraq is outdated and inadequate for an open global knowledge-based economy. The research participants who are linked to HE through either working at HEIs or for the MHESR are aware of the inadequacies of the HE system and of its failure to produce hireable graduates for the private sector labour market and that reform is needed. This is where the foundations for HE reform need to be laid. Among those who wish to challenge the status quo and who welcome change.

Pedagogy in its present use in KRI's HEIs is about learning static facts detached from students' realities (Freire, 1970/2014) when pedagogy should be encouraging students to create knowledge that has the ability to transform their realities. Based on the data, Gannon (2020) no doubt would label KRI's public HEIs' classrooms as classrooms of death. From the data, there is an oasis of pedagogical hope, however, as Dindar says that at his HEI there is an environment of freedom where students engage with and question teachers. Thus, bringing an end to the duality of the knowing teacher and the ignorant unknowing student.

All HE students in KRI must complete an internship to be able to graduate. However, due to the internship being regarded as a box ticking exercise only, it is a wasted learning opportunity. Participants said that they understand the instrumental value of internships to gain work experience and network but due to the unstructured and unsupervised nature of the internships, it is questionable whether the instrumental

value is being fulfilled. Internships present opportunities for students who do not possess wasta, which is used to secure employment, to acquire some valuable social capital to use in the graduate labour market.

Finally, in this section, we learned that some degree specialisations are outdated and irrelevant in today's private sector labour market. One reason for this is that the government was under pressure to open universities and departments to meet demand for HE in fulfilment of its side of the social contract. This was largely unproblematic before the public sector hiring freeze as the KRG annually absorbed thousands of graduates from public HEIs into the public sector no matter what their degree specialisation was. In the post-2014 order, however, graduating thousands of students annually with irrelevant degrees is unsustainable and unacceptable.

Chapter 6 Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the implications for practice based on the findings of the data are discussed. This is followed by the contribution to knowledge that this study has made, the study's limitations, and future opportunities for research. The chapter concludes with an autobiographical reflection of my doctoral journey.

6.2 Implications for practice

6.2.1 Introduction

The number of students who attend the top tier of elite HEIs in the region is small in comparison to the number of students who attend the tier two HEIs. The findings indicate that employers prefer graduates from the former tier, which is problematic considering only a minority of students attend these elite HEIs. Romani (2009) describes the purpose of public HEIs in the Middle East as being waiting rooms for public sector employment. This was true of KRI's public HEIs before the financially disastrous events of 2014 and the public sector hiring freeze. Now, public HEIs in KRI have become waiting rooms for unemployment or in the words of Jalil, "machines creating youth unemployment". Therefore, the need for improvement in the provision of HE in public HEIs is pressing. Below, a number of recommendations are discussed.

6.2.2 End HEIs isolation and forge links with industry

Collaboration between HEIs and industry is essential for HEIs to begin offering degrees that have relevance in KRI's private sector labour market. The Abu Dhabi University, which was ranked by Times Higher Education as top in the United Arab Emirates and within the top 180 worldwide in its Graduate Employability Rankings, has a close relationship with the private sector that ensures it graduates are employable, "Employers are part of the Abu Dhabi University family. We work hand in glove with

them to ensure that our programs are both academically rigorous and produce graduates able to move into employment with confidence” (Abu Dhabi Media Office, 2022, para. 6). Theme ten explains how it is culturally unlikely that in KRI society’s demand for their children to get a degree will diminish, so the MHESR and HE providers in KRI need to begin providing degree programmes that have relevance in the private sector labour market.

Despite participants’ complaints that degrees lack relevance, the data reflect a willingness among some employers to hire and train local graduates. Therefore, HEIs must end their isolation and start to work ‘hand in glove’ with industry. Vygotsky’s (1978) construct, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), provides a useful framework to illustrate this point on two fronts. First, HEIs have limited experience of producing workers for the private sector. Therefore, producing workers for the private sector is in HEIs’ ZPD. In order to master producing workers for the private sector, HEIs must foster relationships with more knowledgeable others, that is to say, the private sector, which can guide HEIs to become masters in successfully producing hireable private sector graduates. Second, HEIs in KRI should foster relationships with HEIs in the Middle Eastern region that are successfully producing graduates for the private sector labour market. This latter group of HEIs represents the more knowledgeable others in Vygotsky’s construct that can guide KRI’s HEIs through their ZPD. Abu Dhabi University, cited just above, was established in 2003 so like HEIs in KRI is a young university and exemplifies what KRI’s HEIs should aim at becoming.

In KRI, the participant, Alan, says that the first steps in forging links with the private sector have been taken by the MHESR by establishing an IAB. This is a step in the right direction, but it is not sufficient. There are resources already available to HEIs

that can be better utilised. HEIs must establish connections with their alumni and open alumni offices on every campus. Connecting with alumni brings many advantages (Suman, 2023). First, alumni provide a direct door to connect with private sector organisations. This ‘direct door’ is particularly important for KRI’s public HEIs as employer-participants in this study indicate a preference for hiring graduates from the top tier of HEIs. Moreover, employer-respondents in the UNESCO report indicate an unwillingness to hire TVET graduates of public HEIs. Therefore, alumni of public HEIs who are successfully employed provide a direct, open door to private employers and who can encourage engagement and collaboration between their employer and the HEI that they graduated from. Second, alumni are positive role models that students can look up to and imagine as their future selves. Jawan said, local students need “Iraqi role models who are successful entrepreneurs [and] businesspeople”. Having role models, who do not work in the public sector, to emulate could contribute towards a transformation of the habitus from dependency on public sector employment to seeking out a path in the private sector. Third, alumni can offer career guidance to students. Alumni can help students build resilience, which is an important attribute to possess in the private sector labour market because as Jawan commented, graduates may be rejected by employers 20 or 30 times. As workers in the private sector, alumni can offer real world career guidance to students and give personable and relatable advice on how to cope with employer-rejection and strategies on how to critically examine oneself to improve for the next interview.

HEIs must make better use of the CDCs. The CDCs are already established on all public HEI campuses and have connections with some private sector companies, so I recommend that HEIs expand the role of their CDCs to make better use of an existing and underused resource. Moreover, as another recommendation is to embed skills into

the curricula rather than providing training workshops (see below), the CDC staff can take on additional roles. The CDC staff can coordinate the surveying of the private sector to research what degrees are relevant for the labour market and take an active role in developing the curricula (see below) as the CDC staff are knowledgeable about graduate employability and the types of skills that private sector employers need.

6.2.3 Embed employability into the curricula

The greater importance ascribed to skills over credentials is significant for HE planning as it shows that employability skills need to be embedded into degrees rather than offered through workshops organised by CDCs. To recall, Monteabaro and Atroshi's (2014) study shows that not all students know about the existence of CDCs. This means that not all students are benefiting from the workshops CDCs hold on employability skills. Embedding skills into the curricula offers a resolution for all students to have equal access to this valuable form of cultural capital.

Before the process of embedding employability into the curricula begins, the staff that are responsible for the curriculum development are to attend training workshops as they must be fully engaged and knowledgeable about employability and its importance for graduates' success in the labour market. Then a needs assessment of what skills different industries in the private sector need must be carried out. Once the needed skills have been identified, curriculum mapping needs to be undertaken to identify opportunities for integrating the skills into modules' learning outcomes. In course outlines, hard and soft skills must be explicitly stated as being employability skills. This makes it clear to students that they are expected to develop and be able to demonstrate these skills, which will help to encourage them to actively work towards acquiring them throughout the module.

This study's participants share the belief that the elite English medium institutions produce graduates that are better prepared than their second-tier counterparts. Carol and Louie both say that graduates from the elite HEIs have better hard skills such as English language and computing skills, and soft skills. Computer skills must be embedded into modules, which can be done through adopting blended learning using learning platforms such as Blackboard or Moodle opposed to purely face to face learning. It was not until the COVID-19 pandemic that ICT was introduced into HE in KRI when the use of Zoom and Microsoft Teams was essential for online learning to happen. Furthermore, language classes can be made a compulsory component of degree programmes instead of being voluntary.

Moreover, assessments must provide opportunities for students to demonstrate the employability skills that they have actively worked at acquiring (Yorke & Knight, 2004). HEIs must move away from the traditional summative assessments towards formative assessments that provide students with multiple opportunities to track their development of certain skills. Through using formative assessments, there is a transition from performance to mastery goals, which may meet some resistance from students and teachers alike as it is most likely that their pedagogical habitus has been formed by rote learning which focuses on performance goals (What is rote learning?, 2020). Assessment can be done using work-integrated learning (WIL) projects where people from industry are invited to participate as assessors. This adds a real-world context to assessment and helps students to see the relevancy of what they are learning as well as provide insight into the world of work in the private sector (Osika, MacMahon, Lodge, & Carroll, 2022). An additional advantage of inviting employers to participate in the assessments is that it improves employers' confidence in the quality

and competency of graduates from that HEI (Constant et al., 2014), which will increase the likelihood of job offers being made to these graduates.

There is not a one-size-fits all approach to embedding skills into curricula (Yorke & Knight, 2004). Different and multiple contextual variables all impact how employability can be embedded into curricula. Therefore, it is crucial that the MHESR takes actions on its rhetoric (see "Ministers", 2021) to decentralise and give independent control to individual HEIs over this process.

6.2.4 Adopt a critical pedagogy to overcome the abusive use of wasta in the recruitment process and dependency on the KRG

Wasta is used, or abused, to gain employment. In KRI, the use of wasta can outdo the ideal graduate in the recruitment process in which the possession of hard and soft skills are subordinate to the possession and use of wasta. Likewise, Chad, Louie, and Rachel say that their organisation's recruitment practices are subordinated to wasta. As this is the reality faced by graduates in KRI, it cannot be ignored. The use of wasta can be explained using Freire's (1970/2014) concept of duality. Viewed through this lens, the users of wasta are actually the oppressed and are using the tool of their oppression, wasta, against themselves and their peers. If we accept this view of the use of wasta, HEIs must assist their learners in coming to recognise their duality and how their use of wasta equates to an act of oppression against themselves. This is to be done through pedagogical reform.

Adopting Freire's critical pedagogy can not only help learners to come to realise their oppression by their use of wasta but also of their dependency on the KRG to provide for them. It is only after individuals come to such a conscious realisation of their dependency that private sector employment can become desirable. Monteabaro and

Atroshi's (2014) study highlights the social prestige that society perceives public sector employment bestows on its workers. This is in spite of society also criticising the endemic political corruption in the KRG. A critical pedagogy helps learners become conscious of factors that oppress them, such as the endemic political corruption that nurtures dependency on the KRG and/or political parties. A critical pedagogy's aim is the liberation of the oppressed from being "children of the government" (Dindar), from their dependency on public sector employment, and to ultimately transform themselves and thus their employability.

The case has been made for pedagogical reform as a priority, but it must be undertaken with caution and planning if it is to be successful long-term. Hayes et al. (2015) provide a useful example from the Kingdom of Bahrain, whose context is not dissimilar to KRI's. In Bahrain, pedagogical reform implemented by the government failed due to lack of support from teachers, and students and their families. The practicalities of how successful pedagogical reform is implemented and sustained in KRI is to first form communities of practice (CoPs; Lave & Wenger, 1998) in which teaching staff explore their pedagogical habitus and are aided by more knowledgeable others in critical pedagogy in coming to identify how and why their pedagogy can be reformed. Hayes et al.'s (2015) Bahraini study exemplifies why teachers' pedagogical habitus cannot be disregarded in the planning process of pedagogical reform.

CoPs provide a supportive and non-threatening environment (Lave & Wenger, 1998) where teachers share their experiences and ideas. By inviting teaching staff that are stakeholders in the pedagogical reform to identify outcomes and goals of the reforms, encourages a sense of ownership over the reforms, which is vital to the success and longevity of pedagogical reforms. It also provides the teaching staff with the

opportunity to guide the direction of the reforms and demonstrate that as stakeholders in the reform process their input is valued. The extensive training and support provided by the CoPs is intended to be ongoing and indefinite. Participating in a workshop and then being left to implement the reforms is insufficient and will most likely result in teaching staff reverting back to their old style of pedagogy. A robust system of monitoring, evaluation, and feedback must be in place. The system of evaluation is to be carried out through the CoPs and is to be understood as a tool of learning and CPD that benefits all members of the CoP. Annual conferences are recommended to be held in KRI on pedagogical reform and more specifically on implementing critical pedagogy in the region's HE classrooms, which will help to maintain momentum in the process of pedagogical reform as well as giving extra purpose to the CoPs.

6.2.5 Produce reflective practitioners

For graduates to be successful in the private sector labour market, Raman and Jawan say that graduates need to become more self-critical to examine themselves and to learn from situations and adapt when they have not been successful. Additionally, reflexivity is required for habitus to be transformed from one of dependency on the KRG to one of self-reliance. Therefore, HE must begin producing reflective practitioners who can examine and question their own beliefs and actions. The question is how can this be done?

Like KRI, Malaysia has a centralised education system (Dinham, Choy, Williams, & Yim, 2020) and traditional teaching practices used by teaching staff are said to encourage rote learning (Kek & Huijser, 2011). Reflective practice has been adopted by the Malaysian educational authorities as a means by which pedagogy can be

transformed to support students' learning (Nasir & Sulaiman, 2015 in Dinham et al. 2020; original in Bahasa Malaysia) and to engage students in their learning.

However, in Malaysia, there is resistance to adopting reflective practice and pedagogical reforms. Dinham et al. (2020) explain that for this resistance to be overcome, teaching staff need more encouragement, direction, and support in becoming reflective practitioners. Dinham et al. continue to explain how in Australia, reflective practice has been systemically adopted. This is to say that the Australian educational authorities have embarked on an active path of changing the pedagogical culture and that teaching staff must demonstrate their acceptance of and inclusion in this new pedagogical culture by providing evidence of their reflective practice to qualify for promotion. A change of pedagogical culture is needed in KRI's HE system. One which values reflective practice as a means of CPD to improve their pedagogy and learner outcomes. At present, academics in KRI's HEIs are rewarded for publishing research in peer reviewed journals but not for quality teaching. Therefore, there is no institutional-led motivation for academic teaching staff to reform their pedagogy and adopt reflective practices to benefit their learners.

Moreover, for a successful change in pedagogical culture to occur, discussions on reflective practice and pedagogical reform need to be led by motivated, interested, and informed practitioners (Tan & Halili, 2015) because as Goh and Wong (2014) point out if there is an insufficient support structure to assist academic teaching staff to transform their pedagogical practice, their traditional pedagogical teaching habits will persist. In Malaysia, research reflects the need for a system of mentorship to provide the ongoing support that is needed to change the professional culture and to nurture reflective practitioners (Dinham et al., 2020). Mentoring should run alongside the CoPs in KRI,

where individual academic practitioners are assigned an individual mentor who provides one-to-one support and guidance in reflective practice in addition to the wider support gained from inclusion in a CoP. One of theme eight's sub-themes is that there is a lack of confidence in the abilities of local teaching staff and how they teach. This negative appraisal of their skills and abilities could be negatively affecting their self-efficacy in their teaching abilities, which Halim and Meerah (2016) say can cause teaching staff to disengage with reflective practice. In KRI, a mentorship programme and the CoPs can provide spaces where academic practitioners' self-efficacy is bolstered, which in turn could improve levels of self-reflection.

6.2.6 Improve the design and delivery of the internship programme

The design and delivery of the internship programme must be improved through a number of steps to help students develop valuable social capital through building networks of contacts as well as develop the skills identified by the study's participants as making up the ideal graduate (see Table 5.1). Thus, enabling them to play the game and become like "fish in water" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127).

First, update the application process to make it more authentic. Rather than being placed into an internship in the public sector, students have to apply for internship positions by submitting a CV and going through the interview process (Martin, Rees, & Edwards, n.d.). This teaches students about job requirements and the need to adapt CVs according to them. Second, before students begin the internship, they are given an internship handbook that clearly outlines all employer and HEI expectations of the student (Martin et al., n.d.) and how students are assessed against these expectations. Third, the employer and HEI work on developing the competencies of the student intern (Martin et al., n.d.) in the workplace. The aim of the internship is to

build the student's confidence in their abilities to successfully fit into a real-world workplace and bring value to it. This is done through mentoring the student and encouraging the student to reflect on how their classroom theory and workplace learning integrate with each other.

Mentoring a student closely is labour intensive, so it is unlikely that the internship programme design as outlined above can be delivered in KRI while it is mandatory for all HE students to do an internship to graduate. Therefore, I recommend that the internship programme is made non-compulsory. This way, the students who are successful in the internship application process get a quality integrated learning experience. Moreover, make the application process for internships rigorous and competitive to encourage students to become more engaged with their learning. Finally, offer other forms of WIL.

6.2.7 Offer other forms of work-integrated learning

Demand for work experience by students is usually too great to be matched by private sector involvement (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). This is particularly true in KRI which has a small and underdeveloped private sector. One solution is to introduce other forms of WIL. Alternative types of WIL include business incubators, advisory industry panels, and virtual placements (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Introducing virtual WIL programs also has the added benefit of pushing the participants to improve hard skills such as computer literacy. Diversifying the forms of WIL available for students is important because as explained in chapter five, research question three, young people today in KRI do not have first-hand experience of the closed economy that their parents experienced. Therefore, WIL presents a valuable opportunity to develop a positive attitude in students towards the private sector as a viable employment option. The

successful introduction of other forms of WIL into HE is conditional on collaboration between HEIs and private sector employers and emphasises the need once again for HEIs to reach out to their alumni and make better use of their CDCs.

6.2.8 Change the cultural mindset that a degree is a golden ticket

One of theme four's sub-themes explains how collaboration and cooperation is needed between the MoE and MHESR to develop a coherent message about alternative pathways in education. This is echoed in theme ten, which suggests that universities in the region have become "machines creating youth unemployment" (Dindar), which in part is because of a lack of alternative pathways and in part because of the cultural mindset that encourages families to send their children to university, as outlined in theme ten, and then to wait for work in the public sector. This cultural mindset that children should go to university with the expectancy of then being placed in a public sector job, at management level, is not specific to KRI. KRI's context shares many parallels with Kuwait. Bilboe (2011) explains how until the 1990-1991 Gulf War, Kuwaiti male nationals were guaranteed public sector jobs, which negated the need for alternative pathways of education such as TVET. In post-conflict Kuwait, the government moved to bring an end to dependency on it for employment and to expand employment in the private sector through the process of 'Kuwaitisation'. This is to say that the government-imposed regulations on private sector organisations to have a certain percentage of Kuwaiti national employees. The Kuwaiti government's policy was problematic on two fronts, first, just like KRI is experiencing now, in Kuwait the labour force are reluctant to transition to the private sector which does not offer the same benefits as the public sector. Second, private sector organisations in Kuwait require their employees to be qualified, trained, and to possess English language skills, which Kuwaiti nationals are lacking.

To overcome these hurdles, Australian and British vocational and training institutes were opened in Kuwait. However, Bilboe (2011) explains that this has had limited success as, just like in KRI, there is a 'stigma' attached to vocational education where it is considered "as a poor cousin in the educational hierarchy" (p. 258). In a UNICEF (2016) report, the Middle Eastern attitude to TVET, or non-academic routes of education, is "perceived as a 'residual' category for those students who cannot make it to the general secondary path after completing basic education" (p.3). These negative attitudes towards alternative educational pathways, which are shared in KRI, need to be addressed early in children's educational journeys. Kuwait still has not resolved its issues regarding the stigma attached to non-academic routes. However, it has been working on resolving these issues for longer than KRI. Therefore, educational planners in KRI should look towards Kuwait's experience for lessons to be learned and repeated (or not). The establishment of foreign vocational and technical training institutes that offer technical degree programmes in KRI would be one step in the right direction as these institutions would operate according to the high standards of quality assurance as demanded by their governments and/or educational authorities.

Improving the standard of HEIs that offer TVET degree programmes is essential if cultural mindsets towards academic degrees as being a golden ticket are to be changed. Sultana (2017) says that by improving the quality of TVET institutions, students can attend quality 'taster' courses where they get first-hand experience of a technical education and can ask questions directly to instructors and career guidance personnel about how their education can prepare them for work and what kind of work conditions they can expect. Sultana continues to say that this furnishes students with the opportunity to make informed decisions about their futures rather than making decision based on prejudice assumptions of what TVET is (or is not). This is a course of

action that the MHESR in KRI should pursue to, first, improve the quality of TVET, and second, to challenge the cultural mindset that a degree represents a golden ticket.

6.2.9 Disseminate a coherent employability strategy

It is not only bridges between HEIs and the private sector that need to be built. Cooperation and collaboration between the politicised ministries, the MoE and MHESR, is essential for a coherent employability strategy that aims at developing employability skills from the earliest grades. For individuals' and society's habitus to be transformed, there needs to be a stronger and more coherent message from the KRG, the MoE, and MHESR about employability. This, however, is by no means an easy task with the KDP and PUK re-engaged in a political crisis that has the potential to turn violent (Katulis et al., 2023) and lead to a second civil war between the two parties. Therefore, cooperation in disseminating a coherent employability strategy lies in the de-politicisation of the MoE and MHESR.

6.3 Contribution to knowledge

Through framing this research on graduate employability in KRI through a Bourdieuian and Freirean lens, I have contributed to knowledge in the following ways:

1. Exploring the concept of graduate employability in KRI using Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 2002) theories of habitus and capital and Freire's (1970/2014) critical pedagogy, offers a novel way of exploring the phenomenon.
2. The enduring dispositions that make up individual and collective habitus mean that if the disposition of dependency on the KRG is to be transformed, then, an early educational intervention is needed. As Rachel said, the skills and attitudes that make an individual employable need to be instilled from a young age and as Rahand suggested, students in primary school need to be informed about

alternative educational pathways. This helps to disprove the assumption that it is the burden of HEIs to equip their students with employability skills. Graduate employability discourses say that employability is a lifelong and life-wide venture (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Based on the findings from this study, this needs to be reinterpreted as not being limited to life *after* university but life *before* university too. Dispositions of employability need to be instilled into children from a young age as it is these earliest dispositions that endure in an individual's and, consequently, societal habitus (1977).

3. The findings of the data show that the ideal graduate in KRI is not just one that possesses cultural capital in the guise of soft skills but is one who can also manipulate the recruitment process to their advantage through the use of wasta, a form of social capital. This supports the literature that says that the assumptions that graduate employability discourses pedal are false. The recruitment process is not played on a level playing field, and wasta, in KRI, tips the recruitment process in favour of one over another.
4. Through exploring HE reform through the lens of habitus, we can foresee where resistance may be encountered against reforms. For example, by examining teachers' pedagogical habitus, we can pre-empt if/which teachers may be resistant to pedagogical reform. This can help educational planners be more prepared to meet and counter such resistance.

6.4 Limitations

Discussing the shortcomings, constraints, and weaknesses of a study is a necessary component of the research process. The limitations that I discuss in this section are given in demonstration of my awareness of the boundaries of my study.

First, methodological limitations. I had intended on analysing documentary policies and procedures of the stakeholders. However, as I faced difficulty in recruiting participants, I realised that accessing these resources would jeopardise access to participants. Therefore, the data collected is limited to the qualitative interview data. The weakness here is that I cannot triangulate the participants' responses with documentary evidence. For example, the participants who represent private sector employers indicated that they are prepared to invest in training graduates. Having access to personnel training records could have triangulated this response to increase its reliability.

Second, the scope of the study is limited as the sample size is too small to make the findings generalisable. However, due to the dearth of research on graduate employability in KRI, the study still provides a useful in-depth holistic picture of graduate employability in the region. Thus, it can be a useful reference for future studies done in the region on the topic. Also, to help readers decide if the findings of this study can be transferred to another context, I purposefully gave a rich description (Geertz, 1973) of the context in chapter three.

Third, I used purposive sampling to recruit participants. One essential criterion was the English language abilities of the participants, which needed to be fairly advanced in order to able to engage with the research topic as I do not speak Kurdish. This criterion only affected the participants who represent private sector employers and attributed to all of these participants not being local. This was not by design, and the participants that I did recruit had all been living in KRI between five and fifteen years. However, I am left questioning that if it had been local employers who I had interviewed, what differences would there be in their responses?

Fourth, not including graduates in the sample. The voice of graduates is seldom heard in the literature on graduate employability. Two notable studies are Boden and Nedeva (2010) and Tomlinson (2008), so including graduates in this study could have contributed to the literature that gives voice to graduates' perceptions and also would have added greater depth to this case study approach. Giving voice to students' perceptions does, however, present an insightful future research opportunity.

6.5 Opportunities for future research

As an exploratory case study, one purpose of this research is to identify future opportunities for research. Based on the literature review and the findings from the study, more research into societal and individuals' habitus would be beneficial if pedagogical reforms are to be successful and if cultural attitudes towards public sector employment are to be transformed. Moreover, the data show how the elite HEIs are producing hireable graduates, so research that explores how and why would be particularly useful.

6.5.1 Pedagogical reform

Dindar says that at his HEI there is an environment of freedom between teaching staff and students where students engage with and question their teachers. Dindar says that this environment has led to graduates being more vibrant in the private sector. Future research in KRI should focus on pedagogical reform and how it can successfully be achieved. To implement reform, the pedagogical habitus of HE's teaching staff should be explored or any pedagogical reforms face the same fate as those in Bahrain (see Hayes et al., 2015) and fail. The teaching staff and the situation of Dindar's public HEI provides a useful case study.

6.5.2 Society's habitus in relation to preference for public sector employment

Society's preference for public sector employment because of the prestige it brings its workers as highlighted by Monteabaro and Atroshi (2014) offers an avenue for future research. The Kurdish Institute for Election and International Media Support (2012, p. 133) report that the word corruption (*gandally* in Kurdish) was the most spoken word in media and daily conversations when it came to talking about the politics and economy of the region. Having a belief that the KRG and its two main political parties are inherently corrupt, why does society bestow such prestige on working for them? Exploring society's collective habitus would yield some valuable insights.

6.5.3 Comparison of public and private HEIs

This study indicates that graduates of private HEIs are more employable than publicly educated HE graduates. This means that there are possible models of HE provision within KRI that can be studied and lessons learned from, and which importantly are attuned to the intricacies of KRI's context. The Minister of the MHESR has said that HE provision in KRI needs urgent reform ("Ministers", 2021). The elite HEIs that are producing hireable graduates for the private sector would make a good point of departure for any comparative studies.

6.5.4 Exploring organisational cultural capital of local private sector companies

A case study that examines Chad's company's organisational cultural capital, which employs almost 100 percent Iraqi staff as confirmed by Chad and William, would provide insight into the values of the organisation to see how they differ from other international companies that operate in the same sector.

6.6 Closing reflection

My Ed.D. journey has taken far longer than I expected it to and has been full of personal twists and trials that I had not envisaged. This is in spite of the efforts made in our first module, *Becoming a doctoral practitioner,* by our tutor to prepare our cohort for what lay ahead. For our second assignment in this first module we were asked to reflect on our learning journey that lay ahead of us. I chose to draw an analogy between what I perceived at that time a doctoral journey would be like with the tragic story of Chris McCandless, who as a young man decided to try and live in the Alaskan wilderness by himself but who tragically died (Krakauer, 2013). Here is an excerpt from that assignment:

> Close to where McCandless' body was found, a note penned by him was discovered, "S.O.S. I need your help. I am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out of here. I am all alone, this is *no joke.* In the name of God, please remain to save me" (Krakauer, 2013, para. 1, emphasis in original). Krakauer (2013, para. 4) tells his readers that McCandless has been described by some as "arrogant [and] woefully unprepared" (Whiteside, 2016).

In this assignment for module one, I had been comparing how Chris McCandless being all alone in the wilderness can be compared to writing a thesis at the doctorate level and how producing a piece of research at this level is "no joke". That if you do not begin your journey well-prepared, you may well fall by the wayside.

Like Chris McCandless, I became lost in the wilderness of my doctoral journey from my own doing. Though I thought I had started the thesis journey well-prepared, perhaps it was actually arrogance that led me to believe this. As I left the supportive and structured cohort part of the Ed.D. journey behind, I perceived myself as being left alone with my reflections on my data, on my interpretations of the data, and on my writing and often feeling self-doubt about all three, and I began to feel doubt and hopelessness in the purpose of the research which led to a prolonged period of inactivity in the

writing up of this thesis. After a long period of reflection, coupled with attentive emails from my primary supervisor, I realised the purpose of this research is not solely about effecting some miraculous change in KRI but that it is a personal journey of growth for myself as a teacher-student-researcher practitioner, and so I returned to the write up of this thesis.

The way markers along my personal journey of growth as a teacher-student-researcher practitioner include a greater ability to question my assumptions through reflecting on my habitus. Using Bourdieu's (1977, 2002) theory of habitus to interpret and conceptualise the data has encouraged me to reflect more on the people and factors that informed my early habitus. That early habitus that shapes my present-day assumptions and how these assumptions and my habitus unknowingly, without effort or thought, has influenced my interpretation of the data and my interactions with the participants. Questioning my assumptions through the lens of my habitus is a skill which, as a teacher in a culture so different to what I grew up in, is invaluable as it helps me to recognise and understand better the perspectives of others.

My view of research has matured. Though I understand that research for the Ed.D. must have an element of originality, it also needs to be functional and accessible. Something that earlier versions of this thesis was not, and which was pointed out to me by my primary supervisor. Though I undertook this piece of research as partial fulfilment of an Ed.D., it belongs to those who can benefit from its findings and should be written with that audience in mind. Moreover, through my iterative readings of the data, I have gained a better understanding that in qualitative data analysis, the real analytical tool is the researcher's mind (Patton, 2015) and that with each re-reading there is room

for refinement of the interpretation because with each re-reading of the data the researcher returns to it more knowledgeable than the last time.

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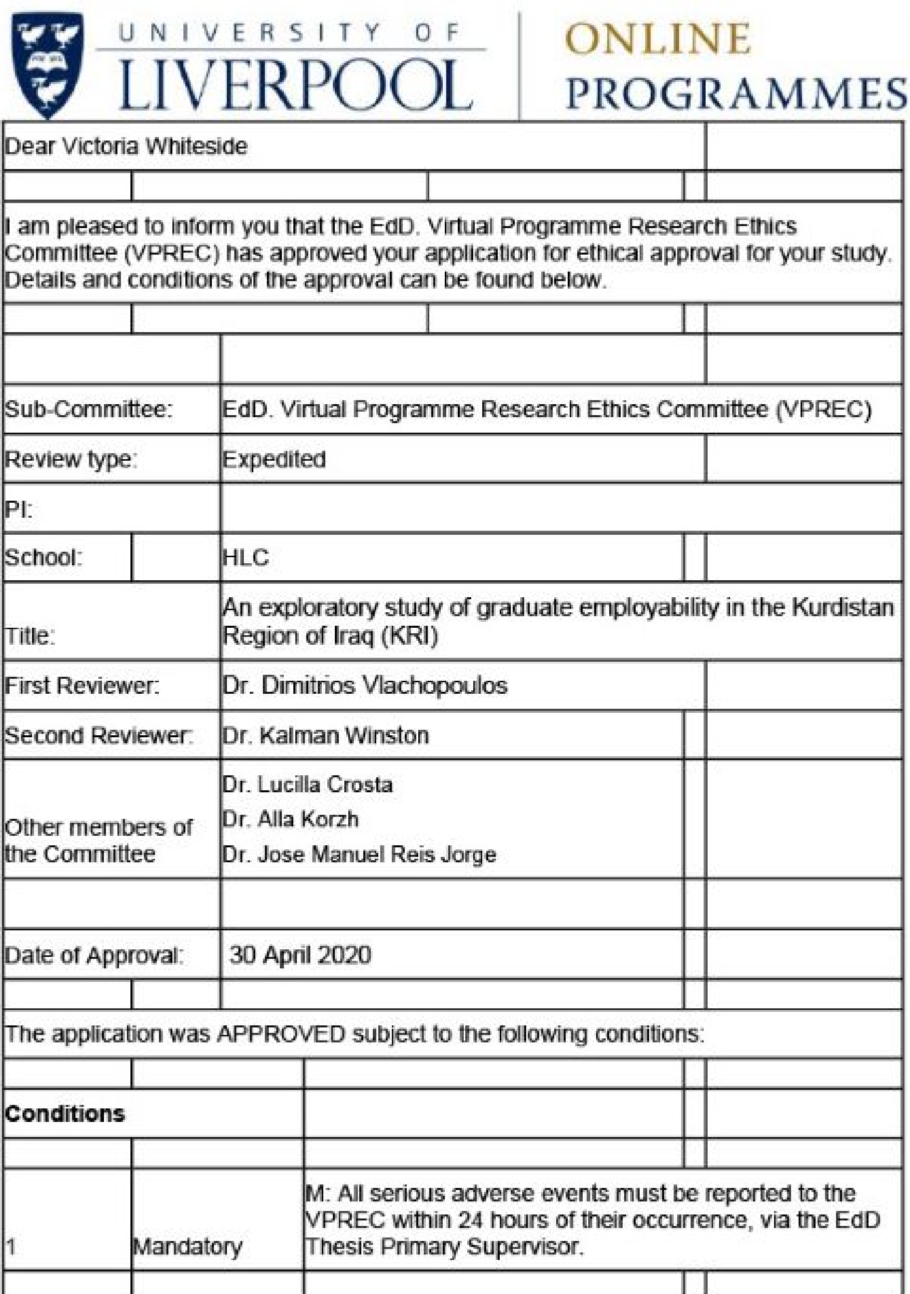
Appendices

Appendix A Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) ethical approval from the University of Liverpool



UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL | ONLINE PROGRAMMES

Dear Victoria Whiteside

I am pleased to inform you that the EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below.

Sub-Committee:	EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC)
Review type:	Expedited
PI:	
School:	HLC
Title:	An exploratory study of graduate employability in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)
First Reviewer:	Dr. Dimitrios Vlachopoulos
Second Reviewer:	Dr. Kalman Winston
Other members of the Committee	Dr. Lucilla Crosta Dr. Alla Korzh Dr. Jose Manuel Reis Jorge
Date of Approval:	30 April 2020

The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:

Conditions

1	Mandatory	M: All serious adverse events must be reported to the VPREC within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the EdD Thesis Primary Supervisor.

This approval applies for the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Sub-Committee should be notified. If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Sub-Committee by following the Notice of Amendment procedure outlined at http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc.

Where your research includes elements that are not conducted in the UK, approval to proceed is further conditional upon a thorough risk assessment of the site and local permission to carry out the research, including, where such a body exists, local research ethics committee approval. No documentation of local permission is required (a) if the researcher will simply be asking organizations to distribute research invitations on the researcher's behalf, or (b) if the researcher is using only public means to identify/contact participants. When medical, educational, or business records are analysed or used to identify potential research participants, the site needs to explicitly approve access to data for research purposes (even if the researcher normally has access to that data to perform his or her job).

Please note that the approval to proceed depends also on research proposal approval.

Kind regards,

Lucilla Crosta

Chair, EdD. VPREC

Appendix B Participant information sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Version number & date: v2, 9 Feb 2020
Research ethics approval number:
Title of the research project: An exploratory study of graduate employability in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)
Name of Researcher and Principal Investigator: Ms. Victoria Whiteside

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide if you will take part, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for the you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if you would like more information. Participation is voluntary.

Who I am and what this study is about
I am currently working towards a Doctorate of Education with the University of Liverpool, United Kingdom. This research study is for the thesis stage that I must complete in order to successfully graduate from this doctoral programme.

The aim of this study is to explore the phenomenon of graduate employability in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. From the analysis of the data, I intend to make some actionable recommendations that will increase levels of graduate employability in this region in order to reduce the high graduate unemployment rate, which in turn will help to improve the region's economy.

What will taking part involve?
Interviews

- To be held at a time that is convenient for you using a video calling app such as Skype.
- Will take approximately one hour.
- There is a possibility that a follow-up interview will be required.
- It will be audio recorded.
- During the interview, I will ask you questions on the following topic:
    - graduate employability

Why have you been invited to take part?
I want to portray a holistic picture of graduate employability in this region. In order to do this, individuals from three government ministries, four universities, one training provider and five private companies have been invited to participate in this research.

Do you have to take part?
Participation in this research study is completely voluntary, and you have the right to refuse your participation. You can refuse to answer any question and can withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence whatsoever.

Page 1 of 2

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

How will your data be used?
As this research is being undertaken to complete a postgraduate degree, the Student Researcher's supervisor, Dr. Mariya Ivancheva is responsible for the management of the data. Any queries relating to the handling of your personal data can be sent to mariya.ivancheva@liverpool.ac.uk.

- The data will be anonymized before analysis begins.
- Electronic data will be stored on a password protected hard drive. The hard drive will be kept in a safe box to which only I have access.
- Only once the data has been anonymized with all identifying features removed, and transcribed, will it be shared with my primary supervisor at the University of Liverpool.
- The data will be encrypted and transferred via an online cloud storage space to my primary supervisor.
- Data will be kept for five years from its collection date (as per University of Liverpool policy).
- The data may only be used in other future research projects if you give consent.

What are the possible risks and benefits of taking part?
Risks
I foresee there being no risk in participating in this research. You are free to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw at any time if you feel uncomfortable or at risk. The data will be anonymized before analysis; all identifying features will be removed and pseudonyms will be used.
Benefits
There are no direct benefits. However potential indirect benefits include an increase in levels of graduate employability, which could result in higher employment rates, thus, strengthening the regional economy.

There are no personal financial benefits/compensation in agreeing to participate in this study.

What will happen to the results of the study?
The findings and recommendations of the research will be written up and circulated amongst higher education institutions, private employers, and relevant government ministries.
You will not be identifiable from the results unless you have consented to being so.

What will happen if you want to stop taking part?
You can withdraw from the study at any time, and without any explanation. You can request that information you have given be destroyed before it has been anonymized.

Who should you contact if you are dissatisfied for any reason?
Research Participant Advocate: liverpoolethics@liverpool-online.com

Who should you contact for further information?
Student Investigator: Victoria Whiteside; +964 751 861 8574
victoria.whiteside@online.liverpool.ac.uk

Thank you

Appendix C Participant informed consent

Participant Informed Consent

Version number & date: v1, 11 Nov 2019
Research ethics approval number:
Title of the research project: An exploratory study of graduate employability in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)
Name of researcher(s): Ms. Victoria Whiteside

I agree to take part in the study. I have read and understood the participant information sheet (PIS). I am aware that I can withdraw my participation in this research at any time, and that I can request that the information I have given be destroyed at any time prior to publication.

Name (participant):	Name (researcher):
___________________________	___________________________
Signed (participant):	Signed (researcher):
___________________________	___________________________
Date (participant):	Date (researcher):
___________________________	___________________________

Appendix D Participant debrief sheet

Participant Debrief Sheet

Version number & date: v1, 2 Nov 2019
Research ethics approval number:
Title of the research project: An exploratory study of graduate employability in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)
Name of researcher: Victoria Whiteside

Thank you for participating in the interviews, and providing organizational documents (if asked to do so). I hope that you have found it interesting and have not been upset by any of the topics discussed. However, if you have found any part of this experience to be distressing and you wish to speak to the Researcher, please contact:

Victoria Whiteside
+964 751 861 8674
victoria.whiteside@online.liverpool.ac.uk

Or if you are dissatisfied for any reason, or have experienced any problems please contact a Research Participant Advocate:

liverpoolethics@liverpool-online.com

Appendix E Screenshots of the KRG Internship website (now offline)

KRG - Internship Program

ڕێنمایی بۆ خوێندکاران

د.نه. ڕاستی د. عەلی

بەڕێوەبەرایەتی بەکارخستنی زانکۆی کۆیە

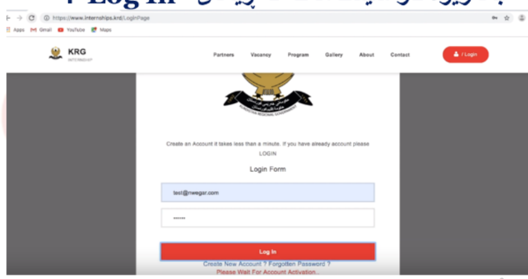
٢٠٢٠/٢/٢٣

پێناسە

بەرنامەیەکی **KRG - Internship Program** حکومەتی هەرێمی کوردستانە کە بەهۆیەوە دەتوانی مەشقی هاوینە لە کۆمپانیایەکی کەرتی تایبەت بدۆزیەوە و دوای تەواوکردنی مەشق بە سەرکەوتویی بروانامە لە خودی جێگری سەرۆک وەزیران و وەزیری خوێندنی باڵا و توێژینەوەی زانستی وەربگریت.

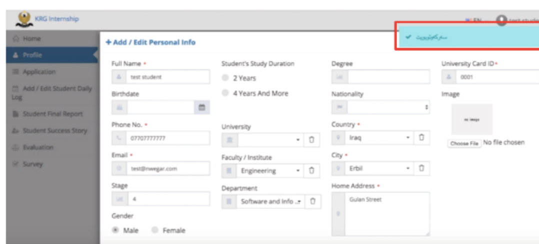
2

١- دوای ئەوەی هەژمارەکەت چالاک کرا، دووبارە بگەڕێوە ناو سیستەمەکە لە ڕێگای **"Log In"**.



9

٢- بە جوانی پرۆفایلی خۆت پربکەوە (١)

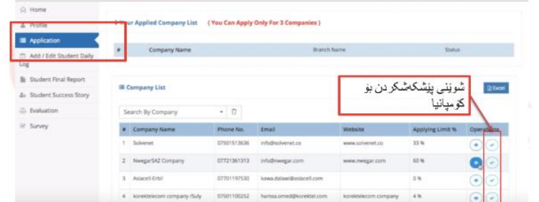


10

هەنگاوی سێیەم: پێشکەشکردن بۆ کۆمپانیا

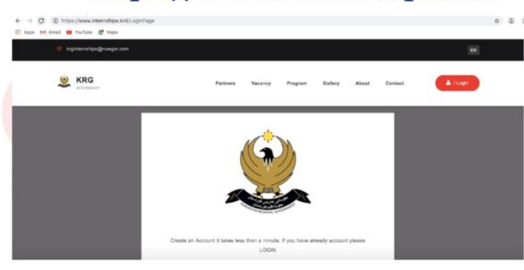
13

١- دوای پرکردنەوەی پرۆفایل و گەیشتن بە نزمترین ڕێژەی ٦٠%، برۆ سەر **"Appllication"** دەست بە پێشکەشکردن بکە!



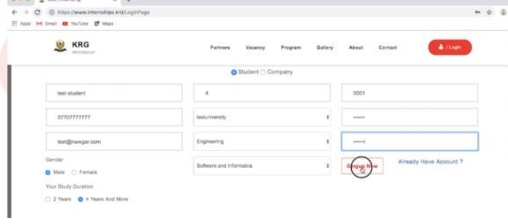
14

١- چوونە سەر وێبسایتی:
https://www.internships.krd



5

٢- دانانی هەژمارێک بە ناوی خۆت لە ڕێگەی کلیک لەسەر **"Create New Account "** و پرکردنەوەی زانیاریە سەرەتاییەکان



6

Appendix F Screenshot of KRG Internship Facebook page – last post is dated 3rd October 2017

KRG Internship Program
1.5K followers • 0 following

Message Follow Search

Posts About Mentions Reviews Followers Photos More

Intro
KRG internship program allows university students across KRI to engage actively within work environm

Page · Government organisation
krginternship@gmail.com
Not yet rated (2 reviews)

Posts Filters

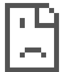
KRG Internship Program
3 October 2017 ·
We hope that you all have completed your internships with strong connections and experience leading to your success in your future en devours
#KRGInternships

Appendix G Screenshot of link to KRG Internship website with error message

KRG - Internship Program بەرنامەیەکی حکومەتی هەرێمی کوردستانە کە بەهۆیەوە دەتوانی مەشقی هاوینە لە کۆمپانیایەکی کەرتی تایبەت بدۆزیەوە و دوای تەواوکردنی مەشق بە سەرکەوتویی بروانامە لە خودی جێگری سەرۆک وەزیران و وەزیری خوێندنی باڵا و توێژینەوەی زانستی وەربگریت. بۆ زانیاری زیاتر، بینەری ئەو ڤیدیۆیە فێرکاریەی خوارەوە بن.

تێبینی: ئەو بەرنامەیە تەنها بۆ خوێندکارانی قۆناغی سێیەمی سەرجەم بەشەکانە.

ویبسایتی بەرنامە: https://www.internships.krd/



This site can't be reached

Check if there is a typo in www.internships.krd.

DNS_PROBE_FINISHED_NXDOMAIN

Reload

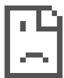
Appendix H Screenshot of alternative link to KRG Internship website with error message

Page 5 of 7

What is Internship?

Internship is an experiential learning opportunity that integrates the knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical applications and skills development in a professional setting. Internships also provide professional development that the classroom cannot emulate.

To read more about internship visit: http://kw.krg.org/en/internships



This site can't be reached

kw.krg.org took too long to respond.

Try:

- Checking the connection
- Checking the proxy and the firewall

ERR_CONNECTION_TIMED_OUT

Details | Reload

Appendix I Questions asked in semi-structured interviews

The table below presents the questions prepared for the semi-structured interviews along with which stakeholders were asked the questions, private sector employers (PSE), ministry officials plus the consultant (MO), higher educational institution staff (HEI), and training providers (TP).

	Question	**PSE**	**MO**	**HEI**	**TP**
1	Tell me about your personal experience of gaining employment in KRI. • Do you think your experience is normal in KRI? Do you have any other examples?	/	/	/	/
2	What is your understanding of the term graduate employability?	/	/	/	/
3	How is employability measured at this HEI? • What strategies does this HEI employ to improve their graduates' employability? • How are these strategies aligned with the demands/needs of the labour market?			/	
4	Tell me about the culture of your company (e.g. how would your company characterize itself? What goals, attitudes and practices define your organization?). • What types of investments are made in new recruits?	/			
5	Can you describe the labour market in KRI over the past five (</>) years?	/	/	/	/
6	Why is the graduate unemployment figure so high? • What measures have been/are being/will be taken to lower this graduate unemployment rate?		/		
7	Tell me how this HEI fulfils the demand for labour for the labour market. • Tell me how this HEI ensures its graduates are able to compete in the labour market after graduation.			/	
8	Tell me about your company's hiring policy and procedures. • Tell me about any external policies that influence your company's hiring policies. • Tell me about any internal policies that influence your company's hiring policies.	/			
9	Tell me about private sector hiring policy and procedures.				/

	Question	PSE	MO	HEI	TP
10	What are soft skills?	/	/	/	/
11	Which soft skills are valued by your company? Why? • How important is it that graduates have soft skills? • Do different departments value different soft skills? • In your opinion, can graduates be trained in soft skills on the job? • Does your company's hiring policy and practices support graduates being trained in soft skills on the job?	/			
12	Which soft skills are valued by your clients? Why?				/
13	Describe graduates in terms of their job-readiness (i.e. possessing qualifications, training, and soft skills) when they apply for a position here. • Is any training offered to graduates who lack specific qualifications and training, but who possess valued soft skills? • Does your company offer feedback to graduate jobseekers who are not offered a job to help them improve in future job applications?	/			
14	Describe graduates in terms of their job-readiness (i.e. possessing qualifications, training, and soft skills). • How important is it that graduates have soft skills?				/
15	Tell me about how your company/organisation communicates with government ministries and universities about any skills gaps.	/			/
16	What distinguishes a graduate from other graduates that have the same credentials?	/			/
17	Do you notice any difference in skills and personal attributes between graduates from different universities? Give examples.	/			/
18	Do you notice any difference in graduate job applicants who apply for a job directly or through a recruitment agency (if your company uses a recruitment agency)?	/			
19	How do you perceive this ministry's role in ensuring graduates have good levels of employability and are able to secure employment?		/		
20	What existing government policies are there in relation to hiring in the private sector?		/		

	Question	PSE	MO	HEI	TP
	• What changes is the newly formed government proposing to these policies?				
21	Tell me about coordination efforts between the private sector and government ministries as to what labour demands/needs there are and if they are being met? • Tell me about communication efforts between the private sector and government ministries about there being a skills gap between graduates and job demands.		/		
22	Tell me about coordination efforts between government ministries and HE to ensure that graduates meet the demands/needs of the labour market.		/	/	
23	Tell me about any government-led training initiatives for graduates to help them secure meaningful and relevant employment.		/		
24	Describe this HEI's reputation. • What is this HEI known for? • How does this HEI protect its reputation?			/	
25	What kinds of extra-curricular activities does this HEI provide? • What influence does participation in these activities have on students/graduates?			/	
26	How are students assisted in their transition between HE and work?			/	/
27	What effects do government policies have on graduate employability?			/	/
28	What advice would you give to a first-year student in KRI with regards to their employability?	/	/	/	/