BUILDING FORWARD BETTER TO ENSURE LEARNING FOR ALL CHILDREN IN IRAQ

AN EDUCATION REFORM PATH
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WORLD BANK GROUP
Human capital development is imperative to achieve sustainable economic growth in Iraq. Over the past decades, countries around the world have invested in human capital as a driver for economic growth. Today human capital constitutes the largest share (64 percent) of total wealth worldwide (Lange et al. 2018). However, Iraq’s economy lacks diversification, and government revenues are still largely dependent on the volatile oil sector. Iraq’s share of human capital as a percentage of total wealth is only 15 percent, the lowest in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Investments in human capital and reforms in the education sector are urgently needed in Iraq to spur economic prosperity.

At the heart of Iraq’s human capital crisis is a learning crisis – which is exacerbated by effects of the COVID-19 crisis on education service delivery. A child born in Iraq today will reach, on average, only 41 percent of her potential productivity when she grows up, as measured by the World Bank’s Human Capital Index (HCI) (World Bank 2020). The HCI measures the amount of human capital that a child born today can expect to attain by age 18, conveying the productivity of the next generation of workers, compared to a benchmark of complete education and full health.
of the lowest human capital indicators in the region and the lowest among Mashreq countries. Iraq’s poor performance on the HCI is largely attributed to the education outcomes calculated for the index. Based on current enrollment rates, an Iraqi child can expect to complete only 6.9 years of schooling. However, when considering the amount of learning that takes place, this child will achieve only 4.0 learning-adjusted years of schooling (LAYS) by age 18. As a result, 40 percent of the (already low) time spent in school fails to translate into productive skills when this child enters the workforce (World Bank 2020). Since February 2020, COVID-19 has led to full and partial school closures across Iraq impacting more than 11 million Iraqi students. With schools being closed over 75% of the time during the academic year 2020/2021, and only limited and unequal opportunities for remote learning, children are facing another reduction of learning-adjusted years of schooling, likely amounting to a “lost year” of learning (Azevedo et al. 2021). The low HCI is largely attributable to the low education outcomes, which point to large inefficiencies in the quality and delivery of education services that fail to promote (Azevedo et al. 2021). This will likely amount to an estimated decrease in lifetime earnings of 5 percent or US$31 billion—resulting in a negative economic impact on individuals and society alike. These low levels of human capital, fueled by years of conflict, nationwide school closures, and limited opportunities for youth, have led to declines in economic and social outcomes.

To overcome these sources of fragility and spur sustainable human capital driven economic growth, change can only be brought about through a comprehensive reform agenda that addresses the inefficiencies in the education sector and promotes a renewed focus on learning. Accelerating human capital accumulation is at the heart of the Government of Iraq’s economic growth and poverty alleviation goals (GOI 2019). Underpinning these efforts is the principle that education enables people to lift themselves out of poverty; contributes to economic, social, and political life; and fosters greater stability. Economic reforms and longer-term development priorities should have an objective of transitioning Iraq toward a resilient and inclusive economy. Iraq can use lessons learned from the current health crisis, turn recovery into opportunity, and “build forward better,” to ensure it provides learning opportunities for its poorest and most vulnerable children. Building a more equitable and resilient post-COVID-19 education system that ensures learning for all children can accelerate learning in the future.

The Government of Iraq (GOI) White Paper, published in October 2020, acknowledges the need to identify the various factors that contribute to learning and skills development, and develop actionable reform plans to improve their quality. The low HCI is largely attributable to the low education outcomes, which point to large inefficiencies in the quality and delivery of education services that fail to promote

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learning and skills—across all levels of education. These challenges include dimensions of equity, access, quality, governance, assessments, and financing across all levels of education. The GOI Reform White Paper prepared by the Government of Iraq recognizes that, in addition to continued and increased education infrastructure investments, more attention needs to be paid to learning and aligning skills with labor market needs. The GOI identifies the need to develop a national strategy for education and training that is grounded evidence-based analyses of key education sector inputs that contribute to learning and skills development. This Iraq Education Reform Note proposes actionable reforms for key education sector inputs to lead to better learning and skills development.

In addition, key to boosting human capital is a holistic education sector reform approach that is linked to reform in other human development sectors—specifically health and social protection and jobs—to leverage synergies and ensure maximum impact on development. Figure ES.1 shows key ingredients for successful reforms that can boost human capital through education sector reforms. These reforms are detailed in the next section. In addition, Figure ES.1 also highlights the synergies and linkages to other sectors in Iraq, recognizing the need for a multisectoral approach to create sustainable reforms and boost human capital.

**FIGURE ES.1:**
Human Capital Reform Process: Focus Areas of Education Sector Reforms and Linkages to Other Key Sector Reforms

- **ACCESS**
  - Increase Enrollment and completion by level of education and in urban and rural areas, address urgent education infrastructure needs

- **QUALITY AND RELEVANCE**
  - Teacher practices, Foundational skills such as early reading and math, Quality ECD (Early Childhood Development), Skills for youth

- **EDUCATION SYSTEM GOVERNANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY AND EFFICIENCY**
  - Education strategy and assessment framework, Data systems for evidence-based policy making, School-based management, School infrastructure and Teacher Allocation Policies, PFM (Public Financial Management) Reform and public expenditure management

- **SOCIAL PROTECTION AND JOBS**
  - Skills provided by Firm: Apprenticeship Cash transfer for the most vulnerable

- **QUALITY AND RELEVANCE**
  - Support for most vulnerable School-to-work transition Internship

- **HEALTH AND NUTRITION**
  - Programs to combat malnutrition and support access to basic healthcare

3 See GOI (2020), page 63.
إن تنمية رأس المال البشري ضرورية لتحقيق النمو الاقتصادي المستدام في العراق. وعلى مدىالировка القليلة الماضية، استثمرت البلدان في مختلف أنحاء العالم في تنمية رأس المال البشري لدفع عجلة النمو الاقتصادي. وبنمو بشكل رأس المال البشري نسبة الأكبر (15%) من إجمالي الثروة على مستوى العالم ، لكن الاقتصاد العراقي يفتقر إلى التنوع، ولا تزال الإيرادات الحكومية تعتمد بدرجة كبيرة على قطاع النفط المتقلب.


وتبلغ نسبة رأس المال البشري من إجمالي الثروة في العراق فقط، وهي أدنى نسبة في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا. ومن المرجح أن يصبح رأس المال البشري النسبي الأكبر (15%) من إجمالي الثروة على مستوى العالم.

وهذا يعني أزمة التعليم في قلب أزمة رأس المال البشري بالعراق، والتي تفاقمت بسبب تداعيات جائحة كورونا على تقديم الخدمات التعليمية. فالطفل المولود في العراق ولا يكمل مدة الدراسة المحددة حسب مقدار التعلّم، ومن المرجح أن يكون هذا الطفل ضائعًة سنة. ومن المتوقع أن يدخل هذا الطفل لوصله إلى سوق العمل في سن الثلاثين من العمر. ومن المتوقع أن يحصل هذا الطفل على نصف من الوقت خلال السنة الدراسية.

ولنحصل على مصدر المشاكل هذه، وتحقيق النمو الاقتصادي المستدام الذي يرجو رأس المال البشري، يمكن إحداث تغييرات في الشكل الذي يتم تطبيقه على التعليم. لا يمكن أن يكون دفع عجلة النمو الاقتصادي المستدام حسب مقدار التعليم، وتحديث التركيز على التعليم. إن عملية تنمية قدرة وفرزية رأس المال البشري هي في صميم أهداف النمو الاقتصادي، والتي يتطلب تحفيز النمو الاقتصادي المستدام في العراق. وعلى مدىاليرة القليلة الماضية، استثمرت البلدان في مختلف أنحاء العالم في تنمية رأس المال البشري لدفع عجلة النمو الاقتصادي، وقتلي أزمة التعليم في قلب أزمة رأس المال البشري بالعراق، والتي تفاقمت بسبب تداعيات جائحة كورونا على تقديم الخدمات التعليمية. فالطفل المولود في العراق ولا يكمل مدة الدراسة المحددة حسب مقدار التعلّم، ومن المرجح أن يكون هذا الطفل ضائعًة سنة. ومن المتوقع أن يدخل هذا الطفل لوصله إلى سوق العمل في سن الثلاثين من العمر. ومن المتوقع أن يحصل هذا الطفل على نصف من الوقت خلال السنة الدراسية.
IRAQ EDUCATION SECTOR REFORMS

Improve Foundational Skills to set a Trajectory for Learning - through Improved Learning Materials and Strengthened Teacher Practices That Support Learning for All Children

• Developing teaching and learning materials for preschool and early grades to build strong and foundational skills.
• Strengthening adaptive teaching strategies and psychosocial support.

Focus on Most Urgently Needed Investments, While Ensuring Better Utilization of Resources

• Supporting reconstruction and rehabilitation of school infrastructure in the most deprived areas.
• Enhancing utilization of existing school infrastructure to improve the quality of education under existing budget constraints.
• Increasing efficiency in teacher allocation and reviewing teacher recruitment practices to improve the quality of education.

Improve Governance of the Education Sector and Evidence-Based Decision-Making

• Improving planning and management capacity and governance of the education sector.
• Increasing transparency in education financing and link financing to education outcomes.
• Strengthening autonomy of schools to manage their own funds.

Develop an Education Sector Strategy That Focuses on Learning and “Building Forward Better”

• Developing a National Education and Training Strategy.
• Developing an assessment strategy that sets out goals for classroom assessments to monitor student’s individual progress, and large-scale assessments to inform education policy.

Align Skills with Labor Market Needs

• Developing school-to-work transition programs to facilitate entry of university graduates into the labor market and to improve their employability.
• Aligning tertiary education programs and governance with international standards and labor market needs.

Crisis response: Mitigate Immediate Learning Loss and Preventing Further Dropouts

• Strengthening foundational literacy & numeracy skills in the foundational years in primary school.
• Using innovative approaches could support self-learning for youth in secondary and vocational education.
• Supporting the most vulnerable children through additional resources, for example through school grants or cash transfer programs.
Education Sector Challenges

The low HCI rating is largely attributable to low education outcomes, which point to large inefficiencies in the quality and delivery of education services across all levels. Iraq’s 9.7 percent of government spending trails the MENA regional average of 14.0 percent and the average for the world’s upper-middle-income economies of 14.8 percent (World Bank 2021). The Ministry of Education (MOED) estimates that an additional 10,000 school buildings will be required to address the current shortages in education infrastructure and the anticipated growth in the student population. This infrastructure shortage represents a need for an additional 70 percent of school buildings. Apart from large education infrastructure shortages, further challenges include dimensions of equity, access, quality, governance, assessments, and financing across all levels of education. Access to primary education in Iraq is relatively equitable—with 92 percent of children attending. However, large inequities exist in access to preprimary education, which is attended by only 11 percent of five-year-old children. In secondary education, attendance rates of 58 and 33 percent in lower and upper secondary education, respectively, continue to hamper broad-based development of human capital (UNICEF 2018).

The limited data that are available in Iraq point to very low learning and skills levels conveyed by the education system. This

4 Iraq falls short of the minimum international benchmarks for public education financing agreed to at the World Education Forum 2015, which called for countries to allocate at least 15 to 20 percent of total public expenditure to education in order to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) of inclusive and equitable quality education (UNESCO 2016).

5 Information provided by MOED to World Bank during consultations in August 2020.

6 Since the MOED does not systematically measure education system performance, only limited and largely outdated data are available on learning and skills formation.
learning gap starts at early childhood and continues along the educational trajectory of Iraqi children.7 Very low learning outcomes in primary school show that students largely do not comprehend age-appropriate materials (USAID 2012).8 While the instructional time in Iraq is already short by international standards, many schools operate in multiple shifts, partly as a result of infrastructure damages, which results in very low time spent on tasks and learning (OECD 2014).9 This disadvantage lingers on, translating into large repetition rates (almost one-third of children attending secondary school are over-aged) and dropout rates (21 percent of children of secondary school age are no longer in school) in lower secondary schools, as well as low attendance rates in upper secondary schools (only around one-third of children of upper secondary age attend school) (UNICEF 2018). In addition, tertiary education in Iraq is facing several challenges, which are preventing the sector from keeping up with global trends as well as responding to local needs for social and economic development. While enrollment doubled over the past 15 years, access to tertiary education in Iraq still remains relatively low compared to other countries of the region.10

The large inefficiencies in the education sector—across all levels—have led to high youth unemployment, large skills mismatch, and low labor force participation, all of which hinder Iraq’s economic growth. The unemployment rate for youth ages 15-24 is 25 percent (2019, ILO). In 2019, the labor force participation rate was as low as 45 percent. For women it was less than 12 percent, one of the lowest female participation rates in the world (ILO 2020). This highlights the wide discouragement in aspiring to find employment, which then contributes to recent social unrest. Unemployment and inactivity among the graduates of tertiary education institutions (TEIs) in Iraq are prevalent, while job opportunities in the public sector are limited, and the private sector is still nascent.

While more investments in education and skills in Iraq are urgently needed to spur human capital development and economic prosperity, these investments need to be accompanied by a comprehensive reform agenda that focuses the system on learning. While more investments in education infrastructure, as well as other quality inputs to education, are needed, these need to be accompanied by sound reforms that focus on improving human capital by improving the governance of the education sector to equip young Iraqis with the skills needed for the jobs of today and tomorrow. Not focusing on and investing in education would be a forgone opportunity for economic growth and shared prosperity that risks the future of generations of children in Iraq.

The following sections will present the key reform areas that are crucial for improving quality and governance of education in Iraq to promote learning and skills. The proposed reform areas as well as short- to medium-term recommendations build on Government priorities, the GOI White Paper, while drawing upon the latest education sector analyses, notably the Human Development Public Expenditure Review, and other available research.

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7 Only 13 percent of children ages 3 to 4 years old are developmentally on track in acquiring literacy and numeracy skills (UNICEF 2018).
8 Based on results from the 2012 Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and the Early Grade Math Assessment (EGMA).
9 In Iraq, instructions for single and double shift schools (grades 2 and 3) range from 543 to 634 hours (USAID 2012), while compulsory instruction time for primary students in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries averaged 794 hours per year.
10 The tertiary education enrollment rate for relevant age groups was 18.1 percent in 2016/17 compared with 42.2 percent in Jordan, 47.9 percent in Lebanon, and 57.7 percent in Saudi Arabia.
1. Crisis response: Mitigate Immediate Learning Loss and Preventing Further Dropouts

Mitigating learning loss through a community-based approach to learning, with a focus on the most vulnerable students. Since February 2020, COVID-19 has led to full and partial school closures across Iraq impacting more than 11 million Iraqi students. With schools being closed over 75% of the time during this school year, students will likely face a “lost year of learning,” and reduce learning-adjusted years of schooling by at least another 0.9 school years from an already low base of 4.0 years (Azevedo et al. 2021). However, providing community-based solutions to enhance education service delivery can mitigate immediate learning loss and prevent further dropout. For example, using a blended approach for online and offline content delivery can ensure that the most vulnerable children have access to continued learning. Such support can leverage the most widely available information and communication technology (ICT)—mobile phones—which 99 percent of households have, while coaching caregivers to support the learning of their children at home in the best way they can and continue to support them when schools reopen (UNICEF 2018).

The focus in primary schools should be on strengthening foundational literacy & numeracy skills in the foundational years, by providing supplementary reading and numeracy materials for students, and teaching materials and coaching for teachers.

» For immediate crisis response and beyond, this could include (1) training and coaching for teachers, support on formative assessment, and provision of guided lessons for teachers, (2) providing supplementary reading and numeracy materials for students in the early grades and implementing catch-up classes to ensure the most-at-risk students stay in school, and (3) implementing communication tools, including online and offline, for parents to best support the learning of their children at home and continue to support them when schools reopen.

In secondary and vocational education, innovative approaches could support self-learning for youth by making complementary, quality learning content available to students, while also supporting learning and teaching of relevant skills for life and jobs.

» For immediate crisis response and beyond, this could include (1) supporting supplementary self-learning by making more content available through curated open source materials—e.g., messages via phone on free digital libraries and apps, and (2) developing teaching materials and teacher training that promotes life and job relevant skills within the current curriculum.
Additional resources, for example through school grants or cash transfer programs, should also be provided to the most vulnerable children to ensure that those at a high risk of dropout, exacerbated by the current health crisis, enroll and progress though the education system.

For immediate crisis response and beyond, this could include providing school grants for the poorest, most resource-deprived schools, including teaching and learning supplies, and supplementary reading materials to strengthen reading.

- **In the short term**, this includes developing supplementary learning and teaching materials that support the development of foundational skills in the early grades of primary school. This can build on the short-term actions from the crisis response, which focused on the most vulnerable children, by institutionalizing successful activities and ensuring they are available to all children.

- **In the medium to long term**, this includes (1) a comprehensive revision of the national curriculum with clear goals for learning and skills acquisition and the introduction of twenty-first century skills, and (2) production of new and aligned teaching and learning materials for all grades.

**Strengthening adaptive teaching strategies for early numeracy and literacy and psychosocial support.** Teachers are not systematically, consistently, and sufficiently equipped with continuous training to ensure that learning takes place, especially in the important foundational stages, and to be able to provide psychosocial support. Innovative approaches to in-service teacher training can be utilized to improve teachers’ pedagogical skills and capacity to apply the reformed curriculum, utilize adaptive teaching strategies, perform classroom assessments to monitor student progress, and help teachers adapt their teaching. This support can include prepared lesson plans, supporting learning materials, continuous coaching and professional development, and peer support groups.

- **In the short term**, this includes training to teachers on adaptive teaching strategies, with a focus on literacy and numeracy in the early grades, and psychosocial support. This can build on the short-term actions from the crisis response which focused on the most vulnerable children, by institutionalizing successful activities and ensuring they are available to all children.

- **In the medium to long term**, this includes developing a comprehensive teacher training strategy that ensures teaching
promotes learning by using a student-centered approach, adapting teaching strategies, and promoting continuous professional development (see also section 3). This strategy should pay special attention to girls’ education and retention, as girls are at an increased risk of dropout as they progress through educational levels.

Supporting reconstruction and rehabilitation of school infrastructure in the most deprived areas to expand access for preprimary and lower secondary education. The infrastructure need represents an additional 70 percent of school buildings. The limited resources available should be focused on targeting the most deprived areas, with special consideration given to expanding access to preprimary and secondary education, especially among children from lower-income households and in rural areas.

Enhancing the use of existing school infrastructure to improve the quality of education under existing budget constraints. With investment needs in education largely exceeding available budget allocations, addressing inefficiencies in education service delivery can help improve the quality of education under existing budget constraints. With demand for new school infrastructure far exceeding supply and current infrastructure developments, a prioritization mechanism on school construction, including options to utilize existing infrastructure, needs to be established to address the most immediate shortages. This also requires the adoption of a school construction policy that includes national planning guidelines and improved designs compatible with international standards to help create conducive learning environments.

» In the short term, this includes (1) preparation of a school construction policy, and (2) adoption of a prioritization mechanism to ensure new school construction projects focus on the most pressing needs, and school utilization mechanisms in key governorates minimize overcrowding and ensure more students have better access to schools.

» In the medium to long term, this includes (1) adoption of the planning guidelines and improved school designs of the school infrastructure policy across all governorates, (2) adoption of school utilization mechanisms across all governorates, and (3) increased overall capital investments in school infrastructure including through Public Private Partnership models based on a long-term investment plan that is aligned with the goals set forth in the National Education and Training Strategy.

Increasing efficiency in teacher allocation and reviewing teacher recruitment practices to improve the quality of education under existing budget constraints. A better mechanism to manage teacher allocation across governorates can also help ensure more equitable and efficient allocation of available staffing resources. The MOED should prepare

3. Focus on Most Urgently Needed Investments, While Ensuring Better Utilization of Resources


12 In addition, about 50 percent (6,961 school buildings) of the 14,032 school buildings currently in operation need rehabilitation and additional resources to meet basic safety and hygiene standards, such as sewer systems, and so forth. Information provided by MOED to World Bank during consultations in August 2020.
and adopt a teacher allocation policy that focuses on catering toward teachers, especially in disadvantaged areas, and consider incentive schemes for teacher relocation, especially to rural areas. In addition, teacher recruitment should be reviewed as part of a public sector reform, particularly in light of the recent decentralization of teacher allocation and deployment.

» In the short term, this includes (1) preparation of a teacher allocation policy, and (2) implementation in key governorates, specifically where there is a large urban-rural divide in the distribution of experienced teachers to ensure higher equity in education inputs.

» In the medium term, this includes (1) implementation of the teacher allocation policy in all governorates, and (2) development of a comprehensive teacher recruitment and development strategy (see also section 2) that is aligned with the goals set forth in the National Education and Training Strategy.

4. Improve Governance of the Education Sector and Evidence-Based Decision-Making

Improving planning and management capacity and governance of the education sector. Continuously monitoring student progress and other education indicators is key for evidence-based policy making for education reform. A key aspect is to institutionalize evidence-based decision-making and steer it toward the objective of improved learning. This will require moving toward a comprehensive Education Management Information System (EMIS) while gradually building the capacity of the MOED to collect, analyze, and use the data for evidence-based policy making. This will also include achieving better measurement of education performance and efficiency across governorates, and analyzing differences in literacy, enrollment/dropout, graduation, and secondary/tertiary enrollment/graduate rates by gender and geography. In addition, the MOED needs to focus on building internal capacity of key education sector entities to be able to implement capital investment projects. Since the decentralization efforts of 2018, the key functions of budget execution in the education sector lie with the governorates. This is relatively new, and therefore any capacity building will also need to focus on supporting governorates in budget planning and better education resource management.

» In the short term, this includes (1) developing a quick Mobile Data Collection (MDC) platform to collect data on key education indicators and build capacity for systematic data collection and analysis, and (2) developing a roadmap for an Open Data Portal, which contains a set of key education indicators and outcomes at the national, governorate, district, and school levels, made available to the public to increase accountability.

» In the medium to long term, this includes (1) operationalization of an open-source EMIS to collect, analyze, and publish a set of key education indicators and outcomes at the national, governorate, district, and school levels, made available to the public to increase accountability, and (2) institutionalizing evidence-based policy making.

making across the education sector, which is informed by key indicators and analyses from the EMIS.

**Increasing transparency in education financing and link financing to education outcomes.** Education sector spending in Iraq is not sufficiently aligned with learning and is (1) inadequate—education spending is below average and internationally established necessary levels,\(^{14}\) (2) inequitable—spending is not reaching the poorest segments,\(^{15}\) and (3) inefficient—variations in spending are not linked to education outcomes.\(^{16}\) In addition, the investment budget in the education sector is substantially under-executed every year. Since 2015, the MOED’s education sector investment budget execution rate has never reached 40 percent. The reasons for these inefficiencies in education spending are numerous and not limited to the education sector. These include bottlenecks in public procurement, fragmented and shifting responsibilities among public sector entities and levels of government, also related to the partial decentralization, lack of adequate capacity to implement capital investment projects, and well-documented issues with corruption.

**» In the short term,** this includes developing a set of key spending indicators, including spending per student at each level of education at the national and governorate levels, which are published as part of the Open Data Portal and collected through the EMIS.

**In the medium to long term,** this includes (1) operationalization of the Open Data Portal to increase transparency and accountability around the use of financial and nonfinancial resources, (2) preparing a five-year Public Financial Management (PFM) reform plan that clarifies roles and responsibilities among public sector entities in education financing and links them to education sector outcomes, and (3) increasing the share of education sector spending in total budget expenditure.\(^{17}\)

**Strengthening autonomy of schools to manage their own funds.** Currently, schools do not have such autonomy except for a pilot initiative supported by UNICEF. In line with international best practices, schools need to have the flexibility to address the priorities of individual communities and to harness knowledge of the local context to identify the most appropriate interventions that can boost learning. School leaders must also be empowered by improving their capacity for school management and community engagement.

**» In the short term,** this includes providing school grants to the most resource-deprived schools to ensure continued learning for the most-at-risk students, building on a previously successful school-based management pilot.

**» In the medium to long term,** this includes granting greater financial autonomy to schools to ensure funding is adapted to the local needs and tailored to promoting learning. This will require reforming budget

\(^{14}\) The education sector accounted for approximately 9.7 percent of total government spending (excluding KRI) in 2019. This falls short of the minimum international benchmarks, which call for at least 15 to 20 percent of total public expenditure for education in order to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) of inclusive and equitable quality education (2030 Incheon Declaration agreed at the World Education Forum 2015).

\(^{15}\) For example, a recent public expenditure analysis (World Bank 2021) showed that spending is not correlated with incidents of poverty—showing that resources are not effectively targeted toward the neediest governorates, which would ensure equity in education.

\(^{16}\) For example, while education sector spending is low, other countries manage to achieve better education outcomes (learning outcomes, access) with similar levels of spending.

\(^{17}\) For example, baseline: 9.7 percent (2019), indicative target: 12 percent (2022), indicative target: 14 percent (2025).
allocation processed to grant school autonomy and building on lessons from the school-based management pilots.

5. Develop an Education Sector Strategy That Focuses on Learning and “Building Forward Better”

Developing a National Education and Training Strategy. Iraq lacks a clear vision and strategy toward the development of human capital. One means for aligning actors toward institutional goals is to have a clear vision with defined priorities. Iraq is currently developing a strategy with development partners, including the World Bank, that will guide the future development of the education system, by (1) establishing a common vision, (2) establishing clear targets and indicators that focus on learning, and measuring learning,18 and (3) supporting resource mobilization, while also ensuring that they “build forward better” to create a more resilient education system that ensures learning for all. A strategy should also be accompanied by Interim Action Plans that operationalize the strategy in shorter time frames and on more practical terms, focusing on implementation.

» In the short term, this includes (1) finalizing the National Education and Training Strategy (2020–2030), and (2) adapting the first Interim Education Plan (2021–2024), which will operationalize the Strategy for the short run, giving clear policy priorities and implementation frameworks, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and targets to contribute toward the goals and visions of the National Education and Training Strategy.

» In the medium to long term, this includes operationalizing the National Education and Training Strategy through subsequent interim plans that ensure educational activities and investments are aligned with the vision and goals set forth in the strategy.

Developing an assessment strategy that sets out goals for classroom assessments to monitor student’s individual progress, and large-scale assessments to inform education policy. Classroom assessments to measure student progress and then act on it are not sufficiently standardized or developed. While Iraq has begun to develop a national assessment plan to track student progress, it has not participated in any international large-scale assessments or institutionalized the use of formative and diagnostic assessments. In order to assess students’ skills acquisition and inform related policies, it is critical for Iraq to establish large-scale national student learning assessment capabilities in key subjects and to participate in international standardized tests, such as, the Trends in Math and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

» In the short term, this includes (1) implementing a sample-based short literacy and numeracy assessment in Grade 4 to receive actionable data on current learning levels, and (2) preparing a National Assessment Strategy that aims to improve

18 Especially on retention for girls, who are at an increased risk of dropout as they progress through educational levels.
learning for all, and is aligned with the goals set forth in the National Education and Training Strategy.¹⁹

» In the medium to long term, this includes implementation of the National Assessment Strategy, concretely (1) participating in an international large scale assessment, (2) institutionalizing the use of formative and diagnostic assessments in key grades, (3) implementing formative and summative assessments across all grades that are focused on promoting learning and aligned with the curriculum, and (4) reforming high-stake exams to ensure that the system is focused on learning and skills.

6. Align Skills with Labor Market Needs

Developing school-to-work transition programs to facilitate entry of university graduates into the labor market and to improve their employability, while improving the capacity of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR) to implement skills-focused programs. With the unemployment rate for youth ages 15-24 as high as 25 percent (2019, ILO), and evidence of a large skills mismatch between skills conferred through education and the labor market, effective school-to-work transition programs are needed. Aligning skills with the needs of labor markets requires developing school-to-work transition programs to facilitate university graduates’ and vocational students’ entry into the labor market. Under limited resources, MOHESR can take advantage of innovative financing mechanisms developed under the recent Competitive Fund Initiative (CFI) initiative, which establishes TEI partnerships with the private sector to deliver joint training programs and ensure students are equipped with the skills needed to succeed in the labor market.

» In the short term, this includes implementing the initial school-to-work transition pilot, CFI, which establishes a TEI partnership with the private sector for the delivery of joint training programs. This develops skills critical for the labor market and increases employability and ease of transition into the labor market.

» In the medium to long term, this includes (1) reforming TEI curricula and developing a roadmap to ensure school-to-work transition programs are embedded in all university programs, and (2) institutionalizing innovative financing mechanisms, specifically for job-to-work transition programs, building on and scaling up the successful CFI pilot.

Aligning tertiary education programs and governance with international standards, labor market needs and the national education and training strategy. There is currently a limited capacity at tertiary education institutions to enhance current curricula and trainings to ensure graduates’ employability, ineffective governance, little internationalization, and sparse innovative financing modalities, all of which are key to promote job-relevant training and support

¹⁹ By (1) analyzing and building on current assessment practices and outcomes, (2) drawing on international best practices and trends, (3) defining standards and assessment methods at different levels to monitor performance, and (4) building capacity of the MOED to implement assessments and use the results to inform remedial actions and policy making.
at the tertiary education level. International best practice examples can guide MOHESR and TEIs in reforming their curricula and especially in developing sustainable links with the labor market. These should also include aspects of economic empowerment, especially for women, who are currently underrepresented in the labor market. International accreditation can ensure quality assurance during this process. In addition, learning at Higher Education Institutions is at risk due to the ongoing health crisis, which led to their prolonged closure, and the absence of effective distance learning programs.

» **In the short term**, this includes supporting remote teaching and learning (including the professional development of faculty and introducing innovations in reaching all students in tertiary education).

» **In the medium to long term**, this includes developing a roadmap for tertiary education sector reform that is aligned with the goals set out in the national education and training strategy and labor market needs, and promoting higher female labor force participation, through economic empowerment of women. Specifically, this roadmap should (1) propose and implement a more agile sector governance structure that promotes accountability and financial autonomy at the university/institution level, (2) establish mechanisms for additional resource mobilization, (3) implement a National Qualification Framework, which sets standards and facilitates student transition across institutions, (4) develop a long-term roadmap for international accreditation of university programs, (5) incentivize partnerships between higher education or vocational institutions and the private sector, and (6) implement teacher training development programs, that are aligned with international standards of teaching and research.
REFERENCES


