



**Social work education as an export product: example
from Iraqi Kurdistan
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Author: Pernilla Liedgren Dobronravoff, PhD

pernilla.liedgren_dob@esh.se

Author: Gudrun Elvhage, PhD

Gudrun.elvhage@esh.se

The present study discussed issues of the context-bound nature of social work. Is it possible to export higher education in social work, thereby crossing cultural borders? Since the beginning of autumn, 2009, a Swedish university college is administering an education for social workers at a university in Iraqi Kurdistan. The different standards in the two countries of this category of education, along with the kind of social problems Iraqi Kurdistan is facing, are raising certain issues which need to be addressed.

As a member of the IASSW and since UNICEF is one of the co-financing institutes of this educational program, the teachers of the Swedish university college are expected to follow certain global regulations and to a considerable extent, this is also the case. There are, however, parts of these regulations, which the Swedish university college experiences difficulties in accommodating, due to a lack of local linguistic knowledge, culture as well as a lack of co-partners at the social institutions and in the civilian society. Iraqi Kurdistan is since 1991 an autonomous region in the northern part of Iraq. Despite the lack of a history of democracy or experience of self-government along with some disturbing reports, there is no doubting the urge of the

Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to develop the region. Iraqi Kurdistan may be considered a good example of a democracy in its initial phase, at least compared to other countries of the region.

In terms of the OECD/UNESCO guidelines, it is not viable that the education offered in Erbil fulfils identical requirements to the Swedish program. It is furthermore not feasible to keep the same academic level as the Swedish program. The reason for these shortcomings is the low level of preliminary training, which the university students in Iraqi Kurdistan receive. This, in turn, is due to the long educational repression during the Baath-regime as well as the system of learn-by-rote, a lack of reflection and critical thinking; described in the section Results (see full paper).

Iraqi Kurdistan is a country, which despite an enthusiastic drive faces much work in building their society, regarding democracy, freedom of speech and equality. Concerning social policy, it is difficult at present to assess the direction of the country as well as the intention of the KRG. If the country tries to develop a social system similar to the one in Sweden, a big effort will be required to justify such a system to its citizens. It may most probably need a tax system, which does not exist at present. The relationship between the region and the government of Bagdad is delicate because of the oil legislation, still not accomplished.

Furthermore, the double loyalty of the Kurdish politicians possessing multiple passports since their time as migrants, allowing them retreats in foreign countries, creates a gap between Kurdish citizens and the politicians, as the citizens lose trust in politicians representing the Kurdish parties. The increase of the number of Islamists in parliament may well be a result of this. According to Payne (2005), a high level of religiosity is often an obstacle when developing social work and the progress of the Islamic parties may thus be perceived as a threatening cloud, since it possibly indicates resistance towards women liberation as well as a hindrance for the development of social work.

In the Introduction of our study (see full paper), we described the concepts of indigenisation and universalism and how these concepts during the past years of debating international social work, have developed into a way of elucidating the differences between the local/cultural specifics and the universal specifics. The Swedish university college follows the guidelines of OECD/UNESCO when performing the educational program, using almost the same structure and subjects as are used when performed in Sweden. We would like to raise the question, however, whether we should adjust the educational program to the local situation, rather than being strictly faithful to these guidelines? Perhaps the mode of education needs to distinguish between

universal and indigenous parts? The universal – human rights are indisputable. The Rights of the Child must also be included there, since Iraq has ratified the UN Convention in this context. The time spent on the indigenous items – how we work in Sweden in this context, using methods developed in cooperation with Swedish municipalities, may be better used focusing on structural methods, community development, social mobilisation, organisation of citizens' votes and empowerment.

Furthermore, the ideas of Midgley on social development and Freires legacy of radical politics and education are important to consider.

The present study leads us to conclude that a university college, arriving from another country will always face difficulties in meeting the indigenous specifics of social work. Should one then refrain from exporting education in social work because of that? Should doubts of methods being adequate be a cause of abstaining from assisting in social development of a country? Or - should one act?

Recollecting the concept of Hessle (2008), *agency mindset*, there may be a possible solution. Teachers in social work, which are open-minded, discussing, loyal and humble as well as prepared to reconsider their own preconceptions, may in the long run provide a possibility to develop a Swedish social work education in Iraqi Kurdistan into a Kurdish social work education.

For references, see full paper.