

## Chapter 3

# Assessing the Social Impact of an American Liberal Arts University: Implications and Challenges in the Post-conflict Society of Iraqi Kurdistan

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### Abstract

In modern times, various American-style liberal arts universities have been established in conflict-affected states, including Iraqi Kurdistan. In the aftermath of the United States-led invasion of 2003, the majority of Iraq's universities were destroyed, which later provided further opportunities for the establishment of new higher education institutions, including those with an American-style university model. Taking the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS) as a case study, this chapter explores the social impact of universities in post-conflict settings, including the impact of the cultural, communal, and research centres affiliated with the university. Using Onyx's (2014) conceptual framework of impact as an interpretive lens, interviews were conducted with nine professionals working at AUIS, five affiliated centres, and at an academic preparatory programme (APP). The findings demonstrate that participants perceive their initiatives and programmes to have a generally positive social impact such as by promoting policy dialogue, instigating social change, promoting community services, preserving cultural traditions, and building capacity. Nonetheless,

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some issues limit the social impact of the initiatives undertaken, including communication challenges, limited funding, an unclear institutional vision, individualised efforts for community improvement, and the Kurdish community's hesitancy to accept AUIS' values and more liberal endeavours. Accordingly, we argue that the lack of clarity pertaining to AUIS' institutional identity and limited collaboration or communication between the university and its organisational affiliates, among other challenges, have limited the social impact of the university and its outreach within the Kurdish community in Iraq.

*Keywords:* Post-conflict society; social impact; critical thinking; American-style university; liberal arts

### 3.1 Introduction

In modern times, many American-style liberal arts universities have been established in countries that have undergone a regime change or experienced conflict (Godwin, 2015; Jafar, 2023; Long, 2020). Such universities have adopted a system associated with political and social liberalisation as well as the enhancement of citizenry's agency, especially in the post-communist era (van der Wende, 2011). Additionally, these institutions help to equip youth with critical thinking skills (Becker, 2015) while providing the expertise needed to rebuild a country (Long, 2018). In effect, introducing a liberal arts curriculum to supplement professional and technical programmes can help with 're-establishing the balance between breadth and depth of knowledge' (van der Wende, 2011, p. 24), especially in a post-conflict society such as Iraq.

Over the past few decades, Iraq has been devastated by various political and sectarian conflicts since the overthrow of Saddam Hussain and his authoritarian Ba'ath party following the invasion led by the United States in 2003. By 2005, estimates suggested that roughly 84% of Iraqi universities were destroyed and looted, particularly in central Iraq (United Nations University, 2005). However, further damage was inflicted upon higher education institutions by various non-state actors, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), between 2014 and 2019. Accordingly, however, such events, especially the 2003 invasion, created opportunities to establish American-style universities that are supported politically and financially by the United States as part of a broader project to 'promote' democratic and liberal values in post-conflict states (Milton, 2013). The American-style university model intends to help unite ethnic and religious groups by employing a liberal arts curriculum to nurture inclusive leadership that acknowledges and promotes the diversity of Iraqi society within what is purportedly a pluralistic democracy. This is achieved mainly by exposing students to Western democratic values, emphasising the rights of minorities, and ensuring they receive a well-rounded education (Long, 2018).

In modern history, higher education systems have evolved to promote knowledge production and transmission while further catalysing socio-political,

economic, and cultural change. Many studies have suggested that universities may be able to positively impact national processes of reconciliation, identity building, and socio-political change, which are critical for the recovery of post-conflict societies (e.g., [Agasisti, 2009](#); [Hopkins, 2011](#); [Temple, 2008](#)). As war and organised violence continue to afflict countries around the world, perceptions of higher education have changed in conflict and post-conflict settings ([Milton & Barakat, 2016](#); [Pacheco, 2013](#)). In cases where conflict has ended, higher education has been seen as a catalyst for recovery, stabilisation and securitisation, state building, and peacebuilding ([Milton & Barakat, 2016](#)). However, universities are normally influenced by external and internal forces that could reduce their impact on society. Nevertheless, some conditions could shift the dynamics of these forces and help initiate change in established practices ([Burch, 2007](#)).

Since universities mirror and often drive many political, military, economic, and social changes ([Feuer et al., 2013](#)), it is important to study the intangible social impact of higher education within the context of conflict. Hence, this chapter aims to explore the intended (or unintended) social impact of universities in post-conflict contexts, such as Iraqi Kurdistan, taking the AUIS as a case study. Unintended impacts are effects that are not specified in the statement of institutional objectives or result from activities beyond a planned programme or initiative ([Onyx, 2014](#)). Some common unintended impacts or risks of higher education in a post-conflict society are brain drain, political instability where universities often become a space for politically active students and academics to initiate protest and political movements, and the risk of political violence ([Milton & Barakat, 2016](#)).

Moreover, [Feuer et al. \(2013\)](#) suggest that, as sites of knowledge production and contestation, universities can become a battleground for the emergence of new political entities. They argue that the process of reconstructing higher education also carries the risk of perpetuating ethnic and class tensions, potentially leading to a resurgence of violence or conflict. In addition, curricula and teaching materials may not always be tailored to the specific needs and challenges of the post-conflict society, leading to a mismatch between the education provided and the society's needs ([Milton, 2018](#)). Accordingly, while universities may potentially unite and reform societies, it is unclear whether an American-style university model adopted in a foreign, post-conflict context such as Iraqi Kurdistan can fulfil its hypothesised outcome and purpose. Thus, this chapter aims to explore the social impact of an American-style university in a post-conflict setting, taking AUIS as a case study, including the impact of the cultural, communal, and research centres affiliated with the university.

Additionally, this chapter delves into an examination of how broader cultural and political influences approach certain practices associated with the core values of the university, such as the promotion of critical thinking and gender equality. Therefore, the central research question addressed in this chapter is: *To what extent do the research, communal, and cultural centres affiliated with the AUIS have an impact on Kurdish society?*

The structure of this chapter is as follows: In the following section, we will provide an overview of the case study followed by a literature review that

outlines the role of higher education in post-conflict settings, while further reflecting on the topic of American-style universities. Next, we outline the conceptual framework used to guide our research, adopting Onyx's (2014) framework and dimensions pertaining to 'impact'. The section that follows describes the methodology, focusing, in particular, on interviews conducted with individuals working in AUIS as well as its organisational affiliates. Then, we provide an overview of the research and communal centres affiliated with the university. This is followed by a discussion of the themes that emerged from the data analysis, spotlighting challenges faced by these entities in attempting to leave an impact on society. Lastly, the conclusion summarises the contributions of this chapter.

### 3.2 An Overview: AUIS

AUIS is located in a region known as the birthplace of ancient civilisations, characterised by sectarian political structures, diverse peoples, and a history of conflict. It was founded by the Kurdish-Iraqi politician Barham Salih, the appointed president of Iraq between 2018 and 2022, former prime minister of the Kurdistan region between 2009 and 2012, and former deputy prime minister of the Iraqi federal government from 2006 to 2009. AUIS offers various undergraduate programmes in engineering, technology, business, and the social sciences, supplemented by a liberal arts curriculum (core programme). It further promotes inter- and multidisciplinary education and focuses on student learning objectives related to written and oral communication, numeracy, and critical thinking skills (AUIS, n.d.-a). The mission of AUIS is to instil a sense of communal responsibility in its graduates, further equipping them with the knowledge and core skills needed to become competent professionals and leaders. Its core values include freedom and responsibility, democracy, freedom of expression and inquiry, equal opportunity, individual rights, tolerance, and honourable personal and professional behaviour (AUIS, n.d.-a).

According to Salih, AUIS was established in post-conflict Iraq, specifically in the Kurdistan region, to support peace efforts, national unity, democracy, leadership, and post-conflict reform (Moulakis, 2011; Wong 2007). Salih argued that education is key to the future of the region and identified the liberal arts component of the university as necessary to cultivate tolerance, solidarity, and progressive thinking among students (AUIS Official, 2016). The justifications for fostering peace and social cohesion also explain the inclusion of 'Iraq' in the university's name, which legitimises continued financial and political support locally, regionally, and internationally. Furthermore, it aligns with the 2003 American invasion agenda of 'liberating' Iraq as a country (Long, 2018).

The political rationale for establishing American-style universities, in particular, such as AUIS, is often described as a soft power tactic to disseminate American values. It has further been utilised by the US government to promote American public diplomacy objectives in various ways (e.g., to counter anti-American sentiment) (Bertelsen, 2012, 2014; Moulakis, 2011). As a relatively young university, inaugurated in 2007 amid significant political shifts in Iraq, it continues to

struggle with establishing a firm foundation in a region grappling with ongoing conflicts. Moreover, political and economic instability has been exacerbated by the devastation caused by ISIS since 2014 and the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019.

Aside from offering APPs and undergraduate- and graduate-level degrees, AUIS strives to make meaningful contributions to society. For example, various research, communal, and cultural centres have been established for this purpose, including the Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS) and the Center for Gender and Development Studies (CGDS). As such, this chapter endeavours to explore and present empirical evidence regarding the social impact of AUIS, especially its organisational affiliates. It pays particular attention to the latter's attempts to maximise their impact on Kurdish society, as well as how they are influenced by and adapt to the changing dynamics of their environment. This chapter also explores any potential disparities between the university's stated objectives and its actual practices that diminish its impact on Kurdish society.

### **3.3 Literature Review: The Social Role of Universities**

Over the past decade, an expanding body of research has emerged on the positive role of higher education in conflict-affected, fragile, and post-war contexts. Existing research has primarily focused on how to rebuild, reform, or protect the sector and on how higher education can contribute to post-conflict recovery (Milton & Barakat, 2016; Pacheco, 2013). However, it is undeniable that measuring or quantifying the social impact of higher education is challenging, largely because it is difficult to define, time-consuming, and tends to be more qualitative than quantitative. In addition, it is complex and likely holds varying meanings in different contexts (Onyx, 2014).

Nevertheless, it is crucial to engage in the debate about the role of universities in societies, particularly in fragile societies impacted by conflicts. For instance, Milton and Barakat (2016) examine the relationship between higher education and four core intervention agendas in conflict-affected societies: stabilisation and securitisation, reconstruction, state building, and peacebuilding. Many other authors stress the importance of universities in promoting intercultural dialogue (Nahas, 2008) and social critique (Qureshi, 2008) as part of the peacebuilding process. Moreover, universities are seen as a space for expressing new ideas and infusing cultural openness in otherwise closed societies, while also viewed as a tool for the preservation of local or national cultures (Brennan et al., 2004). Furthermore, other studies found that exposing students to different ideas can break down negative stereotypes based on, for example, differences in ethnicity, race, religion, gender, or socioeconomic status (Sagy, 2002; Tomovska, 2010). Moreover, through various initiatives by governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), students, and faculty, universities have been instrumental in providing access to education to various traditionally marginalised social groups, such as peasants and labourers (Pacheco, 2013). More recently, following the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022,

[Kushnir \(2023\)](#) concluded that higher education is increasingly serving as a foundation for political collaboration, extending beyond its education role to foster peace in the European region.

[Brannelly et al. \(2011\)](#) further view campuses as arenas of political socialisation, where individuals gain knowledge about how political and social systems operate. In addition, they develop an understanding of their political culture, system of shared values, and ideologies about institutions within their societies. However, other studies have found that this ideal impact of universities is not always achieved due to various institutional, political, and economic factors. For instance, [Tahirsylaj \(2008\)](#) argues that the higher education system in Kosovo remains divided along ethnic lines, and the main challenge in developing modern, open-minded, cohesive institutions is that some universities try to promote 'nationalistic agendas', thereby limiting opportunities for peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Similarly, [Feuer et al. \(2013\)](#) argue that the potential for campuses to achieve peacebuilding outcomes, such as long-term integration, intercultural communication, and tolerance building, largely depends on the university and its administrators' ability to create a welcoming campus environment. The authors examined university spaces, such as campuses and student cultural institutions, as well as the projections of university administrators on social hierarchy in five post-conflict societies. They found that administrators' limited capacity or willingness for change, due to various political reasons, served as barriers to achieving the expected impact.

Beyond higher education in post-conflict settings, more generally, the literature on American-style universities, more specifically, examines a wide range of themes. A few studies have explored the opportunities, challenges, and impacts this university model brings to its host country. For example, [Ghabra and Arnold \(2007\)](#) stated that the main effect that American-style universities have had is in forming a class of elites in countries and regions in which they were established. This university model has also proved pivotal in introducing and strengthening critical thinking skills, serving as a centre for civil society in an otherwise authoritarian political landscape ([Noori & Anderson, 2013](#)). [Purinton and Skaggs \(2017\)](#) further argue that American-style universities have been modernising their host countries for decades. Similarly, [Jafar and Sabzalieva \(2022\)](#) found that establishing American-style universities is seen by different stakeholders as a fast track towards building the academic reputations of national higher education systems, particularly in post-conflict societies.

This brief literature review demonstrates the scholarly consensus that higher education institutions play a vital role in promoting peace, reconciliation, development, political socialisation, and social integration in post-conflict societies. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of empirical evidence regarding their impact in such societies, as well as the internal and external challenges and barriers that impede the maximisation of this theorised impact. Therefore, this chapter offers an alternative perspective on the social impact of universities in post-conflict contexts, which is discussed further below, by focusing primarily on the American liberal arts university model.

### 3.4 Conceptual Framework

Defining and measuring the intangible societal-level impact of universities is a complex endeavour. Each university defines its social impact differently based on its mission and core values. For example, Universities Canada defines social impact as ‘the positive outcomes of initiatives that tackle social, economic, environmental, and cultural challenges faced by people, organisations, and communities’ (Universities Canada, n.d.). The University of Michigan further defines social impact as ‘a significant, positive change that addresses a pressing social challenge’ (University of Michigan, n.d.). Generally, different terms are used to refer to impact such as ‘returns’, ‘benefits’, and ‘value’ (Penfield et al., 2014), which assume that a positive or beneficial effect will be considered as an impact. Nevertheless, this impact, as discussed above, encompasses multiple dimensions and can be either positive or negative as well as intended or unintended (Arvidson, 2009; Onyx, 2014), especially within post-conflict societies.

For the purpose of this study, we utilise Onyx’s (2014) conceptual framework of impact as a lens to interpret the social impact of AUIS. Whereas Onyx’s model of social impact is applicable to social organisations, we adapt her model and apply it to the higher education institution of AUIS and its affiliates. Our interpretation of her framework further involves narrowing down her seven propositions to four key dimensions. The first dimension pertains to the university’s core values and networks embedded in its liberal arts model, especially the notions of critical thinking, leadership, diversity, and enhancing citizens’ agency. The second dimension emphasises how broader contribution to a local community occurs as a result of university practices and active communal networks. We investigate this feature by examining the contributions of the centres affiliated with AUIS.

Individual engagement and development constitute the third dimension, which underscores the institutional culture and individuals’ agency in promoting or bringing about societal changes and developing their capacity to do so. The final dimension is ‘dual-level impact’, which examines the extent to which the university and its students, faculty, management, and staff are embedded within the local community and how the community supports and strengthens the university. It pertains to the idea that the university and its individual stakeholders are an integral part of the larger social structure, thereby being influenced by the norms, values, and dynamics of the society they belong to.

As discussed by Onyx (2014), this conceptual framework does not in itself provide a measure of social impact; however, it offers a lens to interpret and analyse institutional activities to measure their social impact quantitatively and qualitatively. Moreover, it identifies the gap between the university’s intended impact, as communicated in the mission statements of the research, cultural, and communal centres, and their concrete output. It also allows for problematising and exploring the intended and unintended, positive and negative impacts of the university’s initiatives and programmes. While Onyx’s conceptualisation of impact does not specifically pertain to higher education institutions and instead focuses on various communal and civil society organisations more broadly, we have adapted her

Table 3.1. Interviewee Themes and Onyx's Dimensions.

No.	Onyx's Dimension	Themes
1	Core values and networks	Communication challenges; unclear institutional vision
2	Contributions to the local community	Unclear institutional vision; lack of funding; communication challenges
3	Individual engagement and development	Individual efforts; lack of funding
4	Dual-level impact	Communication challenges; unclear institutional vision; lack of funding; individual efforts; Kurdish community's hesitancy

understanding to that of universities and its organisational affiliates. Accordingly, we then utilised Onyx's dimensions to identify the themes that emerged from the interview data (see [Table 3.1](#)).

### 3.5 Methodology

This research relies on the qualitative analysis of a case study to investigate the societal impact of the American-style university model implemented in the post-2003 Iraqi-Kurdish context. The research design and data collection of this study was informed by the Institutional Review Board Guidebook and followed a favourable ethics decision from the AUIS. It approved the non-anonymising of the name of the university that we used as a case study.

The chosen case study of AUIS exemplifies an American-style institution established in a post-conflict society. While AUIS operates as an independent, not-for-profit entity, it holds the legal status of a private university and falls under the regulatory control of both the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Kurdistan and central Iraq (AUIS, n.d.).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of this case study. Interview questions were designed based on the social impact framework developed by [Onyx \(2014\)](#), aiming to capture participants' experiences within American-style universities, with a specific emphasis on (1) core values and networks, (2) contributions to the local community, (3) individual engagement and development, and (4) dual-level impact. The study involved interviews with nine participants, comprising employees and researchers working at the university; five research, communal, and cultural centres; and at the APP affiliated with AUIS (see [Table 3.2](#)). Most of the participants actively lead various community service initiatives and programmes.

In addition to the interviews, information from the university website and the web pages of the organisational affiliates have been used to complement the analysis.

The process of thematic data analysis commenced with coding and identifying categories, which were determined based on the participants' perspectives regarding the social impact of their respective centres and programmes. This involved examining recurring patterns in the data across participants, ultimately leading to the emergence of categories and their interrelationships, offering explanations for the participants' views on the social impact of the American-style university model in a post-conflict society.

The Institutional Review Board at the university granted permission to conduct the study.

The study has a few limitations, in that only a few individuals from AUIS, its organisational affiliates, and APP were interviewed. In addition, due to the limited availability of data, other quantitative analysis was not conducted to measure the impact of the programmes and initiatives carried out on the ground since 2007. Accordingly, additional semi-structured interviews, analysis of the scope and reach of initiatives, and measurement of the receptiveness of the Kurdish public to these programmes could provide greater insight into the impact of AUIS and its affiliates in future studies. The following section provides an overview of the scope of work of AUIS' different organisational affiliates and APP programme, while further discussing the interview data below.

### **3.6 Organisational Affiliates of AUIS**

As noted above in [Table 3.2](#), one of the key research institutes affiliated with AUIS is IRIS, a policy dialogue centre that focuses on conducting research on issues relevant to Iraq and the wider Middle East and North African region. By further hosting events related to policy dialogue, IRIS researchers liaise with other academics to bring key issues related to climate change, the environment, and civilian protection, among others, to the forefront. The centre has further hosted workshops and seminars to aid in the capacity building of youth in AUIS, including hosting the first workshop for Iraq Leadership Fellows in 2023 (AUIS, n.d.-b).

Another centre that engages in research in relation to societal change is the CGDS, which prioritises holding up values pertaining to equality and fairness. Among its many accomplishments, the CGDS has set up the first gender studies minor in the country, while further funding research projects pertaining to gender and sexuality, including masculinity and how it influences social interactions between men and women. A segment of the CGDS further focuses on disability rights in Sulaymaniyah, leading to the establishment of the first disability studies minor in the country as well. The CGDS also offered funding to gender scholars, sponsoring 'Jan Warner Visiting Scholars' and facilitating their teaching of gender courses at the university (AUIS, n.d.-c).

Aside from societal and political change, AUIS has also promoted economic development through the AEIC, which is a centre founded in 2019 that prioritises the empowerment of entrepreneurs. In the attempt to tackle challenges affiliated with poor infrastructure and few mentorship opportunities in the city, among others, AEIC offers entrepreneurs various forms of support, including mentors,

Table 3.2. Overview of AUIS Organisational Affiliates and Programmes.

No.	AUIS Organisational Affiliates and Programmes	Objective
1	IRIS	Serves as a policy research and training centre.
2	CGDS	Helps empower men and women through education and research.
3	The AUIS Entrepreneurship and Innovation Centre (AEIC)	Supports Iraqi/Kurdish entrepreneurs by creating a helpful, scalable ecosystem through research, education, networking, and partnerships.
4	AUIS Center for Archaeology and Cultural Heritage (CACHE)	Preserves and raises awareness of Iraqi/Kurdish cultural heritage and archaeological sites.
5	Kashkul – Centre for Arts and Culture	Aims to protect artistic and cultural expression and material.
6	APP – Community Outreach	Aids community outreach through supporting teacher professional development, training high school students, and developing English proficiency of marginalised individuals.

funding, and resources to aid their growth and development. Moreover, it has launched a business accelerator called Takween, which has the capacity to aid dozens of entrepreneurial ventures across the country (AUIS, n.d.-d).

In accordance with Iraq's rich cultural heritage, the university has further established CACHE to promote the protection and development of cultural and historical sites across Kurdistan and Iraq more broadly. By offering training sessions to youth and adopting a scientific approach to Iraqi history, various technologies are adopted by this centre to protect cultural heritage sites from looting and/or other violent non-state actors that seek to profit from or destroy buildings or historical areas (AUIS, n.d.-e).

The last centre founded to support artistic and cultural expression is Kaskhul, which attempts to preserve cultural and historical artistic works in Iraqi Kurdistan. Established in 2016, Kaskhul's projects have ranged from the artistic or cultural to the literary, and the centre works on hosting arts events, curating arts exhibitions, and hosting other events at the university. As one of the longest standing centres affiliated with AUIS, Kaskhul has supported the publishing of over 2,000 pages of translated literature in the attempt to make it more accessible to the international community. It further supports artistic and cultural events, including the first-ever Sulaimani Festival for Culture and Art, held in September 2023 (Kaskhul, n.d.).

Lastly, while not a centre, APP serves as an important programme that supports the professional development of high school teachers in Sulaymaniyah, where instructors prioritise student-centred pedagogies in their overall approach to teaching. By working closely together with non-native English-speaking students, the APP programme instructors endeavour to teach the former 'academic English, critical thinking skills and study habits' (AUIS, n.d.-f).

In sum, this programme and all of AUIS' organisational affiliates seek to have an impact on society by promoting policy dialogue about pressing issues in Iraq, supporting local entrepreneurs, preserving local culture, bringing awareness about social issues, and building the capacity of both enrolled students and teachers as well as other community members in general.

### **3.7 Findings and Discussion**

This section provides an overview and analyses the key themes that emerged during our interviews with both university staff and employees working at AUIS' organisational affiliates. As noted earlier, a total of nine professionals at AUIS, its organisational affiliates, and APP were interviewed to better evaluate the extent to which these centres have impacted Kurdish society. Our interviews revealed that various obstacles hinder the social impact of these centres, largely due to five observations pertaining to (1) communication challenges, (2) an unclear institutional vision and inconsistent strategies, (3) limited funding, (4) individual efforts for community betterment, and (5) the Kurdish community's hesitancy to accept AUIS' values and more liberal initiatives.

#### **3.7.1 Communication Challenges**

One of the most common themes that emerged in the majority of interviews pertained to communication challenges taking place at the internal level. According to one interviewee from AEIC,

[...] Given the small size of AUIS, to me, it's unacceptable that AUIS lacks internal communications and synergy.

Since most centres function independently of the university, the AUIS management is not involved in how the centres conduct research, disseminate knowledge, acquire funding from donors, or offer training outside of or on campus. In addition, workshop organisers from organisational affiliates do not receive feedback from the university, such as in relation to who to invite for guest lectures. While the management does not interfere with or discourage planned activities, they do not provide input or facilitate any such initiatives.

The instances in which communication between the centres and AUIS takes place are largely when events are being planned due to the need to obtain security clearance, such as to host a workshop. In addition, the centres must also communicate with the university to pay money to host events on campus. However, no monitoring and evaluation efforts have been put into place by the university to

measure the impact of the activities or initiatives offered by the centres. Accordingly, employees spoken to from each of the respective centres indicated that beyond providing security clearance and paying to rent a space at AUIS for events, communication between the university and the organisational affiliates is relatively limited and focused on offering logistical support. Thus, to maximise the social impact of AUIS and its organisational affiliates, greater internal communication must take place to enable collaborative endeavours that can better support the community.

### ***3.7.2 Unclear Institutional Vision and Inconsistent Strategies***

A second emerging theme from the majority of interviews pertained to different perceptions of the university's vision or purpose among its employees. While the university promotes certain liberal core values, which have been discussed earlier in this chapter, many of the individuals in the university do not ascribe to these values. According to an interviewee from the AEIC,

AUIS lacks a clear strategy, clear set of principles, and a clear vision of what kind of institution of education it wants to become.

This is further confirmed by an interviewee from the CGDS, who stated that many core staff and faculty members disagree with and criticise the university's liberal core values which can affect the role it plays as an agent of change, creating a tense atmosphere within AUIS. For example, some staff oppose the work of the CGDS due to their more conservative beliefs. Thus, according to this interviewee, gender equality is not promoted in a harmonious manner within the classroom, and there is no consistent messaging pertaining to advocacy and the pursuit of social change. This further applies to marginalised communities or individuals. According to one employee, the university does not sufficiently accommodate persons with disabilities through the creation of physically accessible infrastructure or provision of educational resources.

However, another interviewed staff member from the university indicated that

[...] Social development, per se is not typically the goal of a university or any educational establishment. Instead, we are trying to educate.

The interviewee additionally clarified later on that the university is

[...] extremely careful not to define AUIS as a social agent. We are not here to change people's ideas about religion, or about how they want to do their government, or how they, in fact, farm their fields.

Instead, the interviewee argued that the social impact of AUIS must be identified by its alumni and the change they create in society. The individual posits that while they (the alumni) are the ones who will adapt and implement what they

have learned, the university cannot measure this impact easily. Hence, there is no sustainability or consistency regarding the internal processes of data collection to measure impact or connect with alumni to receive any feedback from them. The most reliable way to address this issue is by obtaining anecdotal evidence from alumni and AUIS employers.

Accordingly, these perspectives illustrate that AUIS staff and organisational affiliates perceive of social change and *who* is responsible for instigating this differently, demonstrating an inconsistent vision between the centres and university staff. Hence, in order to strengthen the impact of the university, it must adopt a more uniform institutional identity and be more consistent in communicating its strategies and representing its vision internally across its centres and programmes.

### **3.7.3 Limited Funding**

The third recurring theme that was noted by all centres as well as university staff pertained to challenges related to attaining sufficient funding to conduct research and run their programmatic activities or other initiatives. This is specifically connected to the absence of sufficient funding at the local level. In the words of one university staff member,

There's no funding for research in Iraq, so that stops the pipeline...The only way we managed to do that [research] is getting funding from outside Iraq, and that often comes with strings, you know, it's project oriented.

Accordingly, for example, the AEIC's Takween Accelerator receives funding from the European Union and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in France (AUIS, 2020). In addition, the CGDS also obtained funding from the London School of Economics, based in the United Kingdom, to investigate the construction of masculinity in Kurdish society (AUIS, 2019).

Limited funding also affects dissemination efforts, where much of the work carried out by these affiliated centres – such as publications, workshops, and events – is in English. As such, the programmes, resources, and other initiatives are not accessible to the wider Kurdish/Arab community without translators, which also requires funding. Hence, the challenges associated with the acquisition of external funding are exacerbated by the need to disseminate knowledge in the local language and pay the university to rent a space for events. According to all interviewees, AUIS treats its centres as financial resources, not as initiatives for social engagement or social impact. Thus, the work conducted by these organisations can and *does* have an impact; however, this is limited due to financial considerations pertaining to dissemination (among other) expenses. While the university and its organisational affiliates clearly have an impact on society, it would be helpful if the relationship between AUIS and its centres, in particular, was to become more collaborative and supportive instead of transactional to better maximise their social impact.

### ***3.7.4 Individual and Personal Efforts for Community Betterment***

The fourth theme that emerged from the majority of interviews pertains to the emphasis on the individual and personal efforts of the employees themselves. For example, they indicated that they often rely on their personal connections and networks to apply for grants, set up events, disseminate knowledge, and engage with the local community. Both faculty and employees at centres explained that much of the work that they do requires them to be proactive and can also involve expenditure that is not covered by the university. For example, one interviewee mentioned that experiential learning field trips are not facilitated by the university and the faculty themselves must organise and pay for the transportation for students. In addition, the number of communal outreach activities carried out in recent years has decreased significantly, with one employee from CACHE stating,

We used to work much more closely with NGOs, we used to work on refugee projects and work in the refugee camps, there was a real excitement to be out there doing projects, with people who actually need support.

The individual further emphasised,

We have to expand the number of such issues by engaging students on and get[ting] them out of the classroom into the community, meeting these people.

This demonstrates that the shift away from richer, more student-centred pedagogical approaches through experiential learning depends largely on the individual efforts of instructors. Accordingly, the university's provision of greater support to faculty and employees of affiliated centres and APP could enrich the experiences of students while also easing the pressure placed on employees and staff. In turn, this could further maximise the impact that such activities have on the wider community, such as the field trips undertaken to support refugees mentioned above.

### ***3.7.5 Kurdish Community's Hesitancy to Accept Liberal Values***

The fifth theme pertains to the Kurdish community's hesitancy to embrace AUIS' liberal values and initiatives. Despite the university's prestigious standing and reputation as a legitimate institution of higher education and its recognition for its impactful work, it is still criticised for having a perceived Western agenda that serves its external donors to the detriment of Kurdish values and traditions. This is particularly applicable to CGDS, which was viewed as a threat to traditional understandings of gender relations in Iraqi Kurdistan. According to an interviewee from CGDS, the community is also suspicious of the sources of external funding as well as how money acquired from donors is spent, with the interviewee

stating that there are conspiracy theories suggesting that they are being funded as NGOs and academic centres to ‘destroy’ the Kurdish community.

However, it is important to note that an AUIS staff member indicated that the university supports its faculty, stating

When our faculty or staff are doing the right thing ... if they get attacked, from the outside, this university will line up behind them. And it may not be public, it may not be highly visible, but we line up behind them.

Nonetheless, other interviewees from centres aside from CGDS noted that they remain wary of engaging in more controversial community outreach. According to an interviewee from AEIC,

Interestingly, AUIS seems to be known across the country for being an American liberal university, sometimes for good sometimes for bad. Probably, you are aware of the, let’s say, disputes or resentments that came up against some of the activities and programmes from the Gender Centre. And sometimes internally, we are not aware of what the other centres do, but it seems like somebody in Baghdad and somebody in Amarah and somebody in Basra is actually following AUIS and is making a video on it as well.

Accordingly, to build trust between the community and AUIS and its organisational affiliates, the university must devise strategies to decrease the community’s suspicion of the activities undertaken by its affiliates. Moreover, it must take more steps to correct misconceptions that the general public may have about these initiatives and the sources of funding in order to better support community members and meet their needs.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

The establishment of American-style liberal arts universities has taken place in numerous countries around the world, including within the post-conflict society of Iraqi Kurdistan. In this case, the founding of AUIS and its organisational affiliates has not come without challenges. For this study, we have utilised [Onyx’s \(2014\)](#) conceptual framework of impact as a lens to inform our investigation of the extent to which AUIS; its research, communal, and cultural centres; and APP have had an impact on Kurdish society.

Based on the interviews, AUIS and its organisational affiliates have had a positive impact on Kurdish society through the various initiatives they have undertaken to support community outreach efforts. However, five challenges pertaining to communication, institutional vision, funding, individualisation of efforts, and resistance from the Kurdish community have reduced the impact of the university

and its organisational affiliates. These challenges have negatively affected the university's ability to adhere to its institutional identity and core values as a liberal arts institution, while further limiting its contributions to the local community. Hence, while the individual efforts of employees working in AUIS' organisational affiliates have not necessarily met with resistance, they have received limited support from the university's administration. Coupled with the Kurdish society's hesitancy to accept or embrace the values and standing of the university on multiple issues, this matter has limited the impact of the university and its affiliated centres and programmes.

Accordingly, we argue that the limited social impact of these centres has led them to be placed in a precarious position caught in the middle between Kurdish society and AUIS. Due to the suspicions of the community of some of AUIS' values and initiatives, exacerbated by somewhat limited support from the university's staff, AUIS may be drifting away from what made it uniquely placed to address key social issues in Iraqi Kurdistan, namely, its liberal arts identity.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this study.

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## **Ethical Approval**

The research design and data collection of this study was informed by the Institutional Review Board Guidebook and followed a favourable ethics decision from the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani.

## **Informed Consent**

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

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