

Investigating Enrollment Decline in Political Science and International Relations Programmes in the Kurdistan Region

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Abstract

Student enrolment in Political Science, International Relations and Diplomacy (IRD) is alarmingly low. In order to tackle this problem, this research aims to first determine the causes behind the decline in student enrollment in Political Science, International Relations, and Diplomacy programmes. Secondly, to explore the cultural, economic, and educational factors contributing to this downturn. Thirdly, examine the impact on academia, policymaking, and society at large. Finally, to develop workable plans and strategies to reverse this trend and highlight the value of studying Political Science, International Relations, and Diplomacy. The methodology that is employed to undertake this study is Focus Group Discussion (FGD), where educators, researchers, legislators, and other stakeholders interested in these fields across many universities in the Kurdistan Region collaborate to discuss the issue and come out with realistic conclusions and recommendations. In addition, we gathered statistics about the number of students enrolled in such departments from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The data will be analysed descriptively and thematically. The significance of this project lies in addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) number 4: Quality Education and number 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions of the United Nations. The results showed the students' interest has changed in considering such courses to be studied by many of them.

Keywords: SDGs, Kurdistan Universities, Political Science, International Relations, Diplomacy



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1. Introduction

Education is generally the crucial locomotive for societies to evolve into civilisations. The leading sciences, especially the political sciences and its sub-disciplines are the top priorities of the leading developed countries. Advancing such sciences and leading by its principles lead to political stability, consequently leading to economic growth. Thus, such countries will be the centre of gravity for all professions, which is what a developed state wants. If you have a stable state politically and wealthy society, then you could employ top physicians, engineers, administrators, and any other professionals from all walks of life from any corner of the Earth. Similar to many other aspiring entities, the Kurdistan Region is no exception in terms of challenges that must be overcome to keep its priorities tuned with these global trends. Its huge potentials are combined with deficiencies in governance education and capacity-building in subjects of great importance, like securing political stability and attaining development sustainably.

Sustainable Development Goal 16, which encourages peace, justice, and strong institutions. Such gaps need urgent filling, in the Kurdistan Region, the cultivation of a sound educational framework relies on society's preparedness to face regional challenges and contribute toward progress on a global scale, which all depend on political and economic stability.

Therefore, this study attempts to highlight the factors that led to the decline in the number of courses related to political sciences, international relations, and diplomacy in the Kurdistan Region over recent years. The researchers highlighted all aspects of the issue through three focus groups with heads of departments, deans, academic leaders from eleven public and private universities in the Kurdistan region, and policymakers. In addition, they gathered data about admission in such departments in the period the study covered from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The study results will be communicated to participants of the focus groups and other stakeholders through another workshop.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

It has been a phenomenon that, in recent years, the social sciences departments have declined in the Kurdistan Region. These aspects of the trend generate serious questions concerning the future of these disciplines and their potential for shaping governance, policies, and societies. The decline is equally shocking because it hampers the development of knowledgeable and skilled professionals required to address the political, economic, and social challenges of the region. The project seeks to examine the root causes behind the decline, and by identifying the factors, the study aims to find ways to reverse the decline and thus, build the capacity of political science departments to

produce a generation of competent leaders to steer the region's governance and diplomacy needs.

1.2 Research Question

This project attempts to find an answer to why, in recent years, student enrolment in Political Science, International Relations and Diplomacy (IRD) is alarmingly low. The main question of the paper is: What are the key factors contributing to the decline in enrollment in these fields, and how does this trend reflect on the wider cultural, economic, and educational dynamic in the region? Primarily the research focuses on:

- examining the main reasons behind the decreasing interest among students in Political Science and IRD programmes, particularly in relation to how these fields are perceived in terms of career prospects.
- It also seeks to understand the broader impact of this trend on academic growth, policymaking, and societal development in the Kurdistan Region.
- Additionally, the research explores the interplay of cultural, economic, and institutional factors that contribute to this issue.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The significance of this project comes from the point that this is an attempt to first understand the factors that led to the decline in the first place. This includes summary of the present enrollment situation in Political Science, International Relations and Diplomacy Programmes, examining how diminishing enrollment may affect international relations, research, academia, and policymaking. Further, potential fallout will be considered, including a lack of knowledge in important fields, weakened diplomatic skills, and a decline in public interest in international affairs. Finally, the project suggests realistic recommendations as conclusions drawn from the study. These suggestions are intended to aid universities and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in reconsidering the issue from a strategic standpoint for the region's future.

1.4 Scope and Limitation of the Study

The main limitation of this project is that such a study is new to the Kurdistan Region and its universities. For that, there is no academic research on the issue. Therefore, this attempt is pioneering in this regard, especially the representatives of most of the relevant departments of the universities in Kurdistan participated in the focus group sessions, and they confirmed that this is a unique project. Also, as mentioned above, the MHE has no

correct data on the private universities' students' admission in the highlighted departments for the same period that they provided for the public universities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The emergence of Political science in social studies

Political science as an independent academic discipline originally came from the philosophical traditions of Ancient Greece and Rome, where thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero grappled with questions of government, power, and the nature of political life (Brams, 1981). However, modern political science, a distinct discipline with its specific methods, objects and domains of interest, developed only in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the driving forces of political science's development came from a growing perception that politics and the government simply could not be studied the way history or economics, much less sociology, could be studied the way history or economics, much less sociology, could be studied and required a distinct approach. Additionally, there was a concerted effort to define and differentiate it. Some scholars, however, viewed the distinction between political science and history as a matter of perspective rather than content. For instance, Edward A. Freeman famously expressed this view by stating, "History is past politics, and politics is present history," highlighting the chronological focus that separates the two disciplines (SMALLEY, 1980, p. 34). Political science also maintained strong connections with legal studies, as one of the most compelling aspects of the State was the intricate framework of constitutional and other laws that provided its structure and substance. Additionally, the field had close ties with economics, and it wasn't until the late 19th century that "political economy" evolved into what we now refer to as "economics."

Furthermore, Parsons characterizes politics as the practical element of social organization, which involves the intentional formation of social structures to achieve specific goals (Parsons, 2013). The growth of scientific fields requires a supportive social environment, and this is particularly true for political science. The discipline thrives on open dialogue and collaboration among scholars, which are essential for advancing research. This close relationship between political science and the development of democracy highlights how the field is uniquely influenced by the broader political and social context in which it operates. Moreover, Political science can only thrive under specific intellectual and social conditions. It requires a culture where debate is grounded in analysis and observation, and political issues are acknowledged as matters that can be resolved through reasoned argument rather than tradition or authority. In this way, the development of political science is deeply influenced by the nature of the political society in which it exists.

2.1.1 Content of Political Science

Some scholars distinguish between "politics" and "political science." (Wang, 2022; Jervis, 2018) in this context, politics is understood as the study of political power. In contrast, political science encompasses a broader range of disciplines that enhance the understanding of the environment in which political power functions. These include fields such as political history, political economy, political sociology, political anthropology, political psychology, and political geography, among others. Despite ongoing debates over the scope of political science, the 1949 UNESCO Conference outlined four core areas of focus (Ebenstein, 1948):

- ***Political Thought and Theory***

It is an area that probes into the philosophical grounding for political systems and ideologies, from classic thinkers to modern theorists. It debates basic issues of justice, democracy, freedom, and authority in the search for an appropriate way of organizing society.

- ***Governments and Political Systems***

Political science includes the study of political systems and structures of government. In this context, it involves the comparative analysis of various types of government, including democracies, authoritarian regimes, and monarchies, and their respective political institutions such as parliaments, executives, and courts.

- ***The Dynamics of Political Behavior***

Among the leading strands of political science is political behaviour and dynamics, which studies actors, attitudes, and interactions between individuals, groups, and institutions involved in the political sphere. This branch of learning seeks answers to several questions, including how and why individuals engage in political activities, what determines their political choices, and then how such behaviours shape general political systems and results.

- ***International Relations and Global Politics.***

International Relations (IR) and global politics are those significant branches of political science that feature interaction, power, and the relationship between nations and the broader international system. This branch explains the contradictory web of diplomacy, conflict, cooperation, and economic exchange which characterizes global interactions. Accordingly, international relations and global politics will be increasingly

relevant to meeting the global challenges of the day: climate change, securities, and economic inequalities in an age of increasing globalization.

2.2 Historical Evolution of International Relations

The historical evolution of International Relations (IR) goes hand in hand with political philosophy, with ideas from ancient thinkers like Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes of power and conflict. Nevertheless, as scholars note, IR did not appear as a separate academic discipline until the early twentieth century, approximately, after the First World War. Although the first department of International Relations was launched in Aberystwyth University, Wales in 1919, such a discipline can be regarded as formally established (Booth, 2019).

International Relations initially focused on diplomatic history and international law in explaining the wars and searched for mechanisms of maintaining peace. The discipline would evolve to cover wider issues related to international organizations, global governance, and non-state actors. Revisionist scholars, by contrast, argue that IR did not emerge simply as a response to war but also out of the increasing economic interdependence and liberal theories of commercial society as conflict-reducing. This shift in importance is justified because IR is the social science most focused on understanding the long-term processes of change that impact all of humanity. This focus (Spalińska, 2022).

International Relations as a field primarily examines the interactions between states, which define the complex characteristics of the international system. Beyond this, IR also explores the role of non-state actors, which operate alongside sovereign states. The interplay between state and non-state entities reflects the evolving dynamics of global politics and the development of institutions worldwide. Additionally, International Relations aims to logically analyze the diverse behaviours of states and the different forms of their interactions, which often involve conflicting paradigms. The field primarily focuses on the political, social, economic, strategic, and cultural developments both within and between states (Czaputowicz & Wojciuk, 2017). By doing so, IR provides a theoretical framework for understanding the functioning of the international system, including the various patterns of cooperation and conflict among leaders and their states.

2.3 Fundamental Courses in International Relation and their Significance

International Relations programs are tailored to offer the student extensive, multidisciplinary knowledge of the intricate and multifaceted nature of global politics. Courses such as these are central in building up the analytical and practical skills which students will require in their respective careers, including government, international

organizations, NGOs, or academia. The contents are carefully structured to give the learner a well-rounded education in the subject matter, namely, the theoretical and practical approaches toward international relations.

2.3.1 International Relations Theories

This course introduces students to some of the essential theoretical frameworks underlying the discipline, realism, liberalism, constructivism, Marxism, and critical theories. By tracing the historical evolution of each of these theories and their application to modern issues, students learn to think critically about the behaviors of state and non-state actors. Classic works by Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979 and Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 1999 form the foundation. Recent theorizations, such as feminist and postcolonial theories, have challenged traditional paradigms and provided alternative visions concerning power and inequality (Tickner & Sjöberg, 2013).

2.3.2 Diplomacy and Foreign Policy

This course concerns diplomacy, foreign policymaking and implementation, and the diplomatic profession and diplomats' function within the international system. It includes case studies, both past and present, of diplomacy, negotiating skills, and the application of strategies and instruments of foreign policy. This course is suitable for students contemplating the possibility of seeking employment at the governmental institutions and the international level. This knowledge offers a realistic understanding of how countries operate in the international system and how they promote their nations' interests. Kissinger (1994) illustrates how tight the balance of power, negotiation, and strategy seems to be in diplomacy at the core of understanding modern-day international relations. Moreover, new research into digital diplomacy and non-state actors points out trends in evolution (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

2.3.3 Global Governance and International Organizations

This course analyses international organisations' characteristics, responsibilities and mandates, include the United Nations, World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund. It also touches on ideas of global management, its difficulties and effects on the relations between nations. Students learn about the challenges of governance, the effectiveness of institutions, and how non-state actors are increasingly shaping global policies. The debates on the legitimacy crisis of international organizations and emerging powers give critical context to these discussions (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019).

2.4 Specialized Courses and Their Contributions to Student Development

In addition to the main courses, specialised courses offered within the International Relations programmes, bringing focused knowledge to students about specific areas of

interest and thus providing them with expertise in fields most relevant to their career aspirations. This would not only deepen the student's understanding of particular issues but also sharpen their analytical and practical skills toward the solution of complex problems at local and global levels. The curriculum will vary from one University to another, depending on their policy. Nonetheless, below is a sample of major relevant courses.

2.4.1 Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies.

The course deals with conflict management, mediation, and peacebuilding, analyzing regional and international conflicts. It provides students from regions experiencing conflict, such as Kurdistan, with very important insights regarding how to resolve disputes locally and globally. Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall provide an overall framework to understand the complexities of conflict and various ways of seeking peace (Ramsbotham et al., 2015). Furthermore, Recent studies propose that local actors control the peace process and involvement of non-state actors, including local community-based organizations (Mac, 2014). These views are relevant for the students who plan to work in conflict-sensitive areas or with the organizations that address peacekeeping missions.

2.4.2 International Political Economy

This course is designed to analyse the politics of the global economy or the political economy of globalization, which entails the politics of trade, finance, development and the world economy. It looks at how political systems and decisions affect the economy and, in turn how the economy affects political systems. Therefore, International Political Economy (IPE) dynamics are of significant importance to students who wish to pursue a career in international trade, finance, or development. Gilpin (2011) provides fundamental knowledge for the student about how the political structure and the political decisions have an impact on the world's economic processes. Together with recent works on how globalization has affected inequality, offer necessary critical frameworks (Blyth, 2015).

2.4.3 Human Rights and Humanitarian Intervention

This course will consider the principles of human rights, international humanitarian law, and controversies surrounding interventions. Students who aim to work in NGOs or human rights organizations learn normative frameworks and practical challenges. They provide important insights from readings such as Donnelly's *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice* (2013) and Bellamy's work on R2P. Furthermore, the implications of the Rights to Protect (R2P) and the role of international actors in human rights protection have been critically engaged with by scholars, offering contemporary student perspectives on these important issues (Bellamy, 2015; Orford, 2011).

3. Method

This project employed a qualitative focus group to investigate the reasons for the decline in students in the departments that this work studied. The suitability of this method more than any other methods for this project, comes from the point that academic leaders in relevant departments and faculties, came together to discuss the issue thoroughly. In the first place, all those academic leaders agreed that such a project and method was crucial to study the status quo while there is no direct literature on the issue, and no better methodology than getting relevant academics together to study this problem. Also, the literature background was collected from different sources, such as academic books, research papers, websites, and media reports. As Sim and Waterfield quoted (Stewart, 2018, p. 687) “A focus group can be defined broadly as ‘a type of group discussion about a topic under the guidance of a trained group moderator’” (Julius Sim and Jackie Waterfield, 2019). Furthermore, Gundumogula quoted (Thomas, et al, 1995) stating that “The type and range of data generated through the social interaction of the group are often deeper and richer than those obtained from one-to-one interviews” (Gundumogula, 2021). Therefore, the researchers determined that the focus group would be the most suitable methodology for undertaking this project.

The sample selection was through inviting representatives from all the relevant departments and faculties across all the universities in the Kurdistan Region. Representatives from the following universities took part in the focus group: University of Salahaddin-Erbil, University of Sulaimani, University of Duhok, Soran University, University of Halabja, the American University of Kurdistan, University of Kurdistan Hewler, Catholic University in Erbil, Bayan University, Cihan University and Tishk International University. Moreover, Mr. Falah Mustafa, Senior Advisor to the Kurdistan Region’s President, the Political Science Association of Kurdistan, the University Eye Organisation, a non-governmental watchdog organisation, and IRD alumni took part in the focus group. (Tishk International University, 2024).

In addition, one of the researchers of this project was delegated to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHE) of the Kurdistan Region (KR) by the University to get the right data from their statistics department. The outcome of the visit led to the collection of statistics on the number of admitted students in the public universities over the last five years. However, similar statistics about the number of students in the same departments from the private universities were not available. Hence, in addition to the gathered data from the focus group, we gathered primary data to show the trend of the admission of students in those departments.

A few relevant theories explain the phenomenon that this project studies. Rational choice theory, social influence theory and self-determination theory are the main theories employed to analyze the phenomenon.

3.1.1 Rational Choice Theory:

It is a school of thought based on the assumption that individuals choose a course of action that is most in line with their personal preferences (Amadae, 2024). When it comes to students' application to relevant university programmes in Iraq, including the Kurdistan region, there is a central admission handled by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Then, university seats are given based on their average marks in their Baccalaureate in grade twelve. Therefore, in the first place, the student's average mark makes him/her target a specific department. Then, on the total average marks for every year's students, the admission expectation is varied every year. For that, rational choice as a matter of "that individuals use rational calculations to make choices and achieve outcomes that are aligned with their own personal objectives" (Ganti, 2024), is not achievable for most of the university applicants. Thus, the margin that the students have to choose is within the average they achieved in the Baccalaureate programme. Otherwise, for the rest of their life, they remain feeling bad about what they would not get as a career, and doing something they were not passionate about.

If everything is perfect with a student, then rational choice works after considering all the family and social perspectives. Generally, how society looks at certain professions and titles and how much they will get are essential for any individuals within such societies, including those of the Kurdistan Region. This goes to the extent that in most cases, if a physician, an engineer or a lawyer is proposing to marry a girl, the girl is expected to choose the physician due to the respect that he gets in society. It is also the same; if there is a female physician, engineer or a lawyer, a proposing man would go for the physician girl for the same reason. Nowadays, there are very few cases where, despite getting enough marks to get a seat in medical college, they would prefer to choose the course they are passionate about. However, they would get a tremendous amount of resistance from their families, especially their parents, to the extent that they think their son or daughter is stupid or mad.

The trend is gradually shifting towards toward students prioritizing their own interests. Despite facing resistance from their families, they increasingly prefer to choose courses they believe align with their future aspirations.

3.1.2 Social Influence Theory:

Since a society like that of the Kurdistan Region goes by collective identity, most university applicants are driven by the social influence theory. Almost, if everyone could get the top mark in the sciences branch of high school, they would apply to medical schools. This is due to the way that people in these societies look at doctors. Parents encourage their children to study hard to get into medical school and become physicians. This is what the social influence theory dictates. Social influence theory explains the impact of social influence on individuals through three processes of influence acceptance: compliance, identification and internalisation, and considers the conditions necessary for these processes to occur. (Dinara Davlembayeva and Savvas Papagiannidis, 2024). Therefore, for an individual within society to be accepted, he or she has to be under the influence of social norms and comply with the society's measures.

Hence, in our case, too, the students are driven by social influence. Nonetheless, suppose they are not lucky enough to get the mark that makes them worthy of society's respect. In that case, they remain with limited admiration and no such privilege. Therefore, it is not easy for a student to not consider social influence when it comes to their university course selection and application. This is understandable for most human beings in any society, who must follow the norms of the society to gain respect. Otherwise, swim against the current situation societies such as that of the Kurdistan Region is not easy. Thus, the social influence theory is at its maximum.

Despite the traditional impact of social influence theory on Kurdish society, the trend of individual choice is increasingly evident among the younger generation. Students are no longer solely guided by what pleases their families or aligns with societal expectations when choosing their courses. Instead, they are prioritizing their own preferences and aspirations.

3.1.3 Self-determination Theory:

The third theory that this study looked at was the self-determination theory.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) represents a broad framework for studying human motivation and personality. SDT articulates a meta-theory for framing motivational studies, a formal theory that defines intrinsic and varied extrinsic sources of motivation, and a description of the respective roles of intrinsic and types of extrinsic motivation in cognitive and social development and in individual differences. (Centre for Self-Determination Theory, N.D.)

Having looked at both rational choice theory and social influence theory, regarding university programme selection and admission in the Kurdistan Region, and accepting the fact of how influential society is in such decision-making, in the end, the decision remains for the prospective students to determine their future from the lens of self-determination theory or not because they will be responsible for their future alone. Though, society's short or midterm influence should not undermine someone's motivation, this issue remains challenging for most people in the Kurdistan Region, Iraq or the Middle East, and many other places worldwide.

Selecting and enrolling in a university programme are crucial decisions in the life of students anywhere in the world. In conservative societies, where the social influence is strong, this process will be very different from that of a liberal society. However, in the modern-day, even in such societies, including the Kurdistan Region, the more time passes, the more this trend goes away from the social influence theory towards rational choice and self-determination theories. Due to the students' self-interest and the previous two theories mentioned above, many courses in recent years have been suffering from lack of enrolment, especially in the Social Sciences and Political Science disciplines.

4. Results and Discussion

Students' interest in different fields of study has been changed significantly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) over the past few years. In this study, we collected data on some universities in the KRI such as Salahaddin University, University of Sulaimani, University of Duhok, and Soran University, since they have been at the forefront of educating future leaders in various fields, including political science, international relations, and public policy. The student enrollment data from these universities over the last 5 years (2019-2024) clearly indicates the decline in the number of students in these departments. Moreover, this study provides a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the trends presented by the data. It aims to discover the reasons behind the decline of these numbers, particularly in these fields of study.

The data analyzed in this study were provided by the Ministry of Higher Education of KRG, presenting the student enrollment numbers in the Political Systems and Public Policy, International Relations and Diplomacy, Political Science, and Politics and International Relations departments at each of Salahaddin University, University of Sulaimani, University of Duhok, and Soran University, from the academic year 2019-2020 to 2023-2024. The data has been visualized in line graphs created for each university separately, allowing the researchers to clearly and quickly compare the number of students throughout the past 5 years.

At Salahaddin University, the Political Systems and Public Policy department has declined significantly in student numbers. Students decreased from 67 in 2019-2020 to just 49 in 2023-2024. Thus, there is a decline of 73.13% in the number of the above department; at the same time, the number of students in the International Relations and Diplomacy (IRD) department has dramatically declined, the enrollments dropped from 100 students in 2019-2020 to only 17 students in the academic year of 2023-2024. For IRD, the decline percentage throughout the same period is 83%. It is pretty noticeable that IRD has experienced a considerable decline (MOHE-KRG, 2024). This is understandable when comparing IRD with the other department of Political Systems and Public Policy. The sharp decline in the number of IRD students comes from the fact that IRD is mainly international-oriented. While the other department is more localised oriented and can be attractive to students from regional or national political backgrounds.

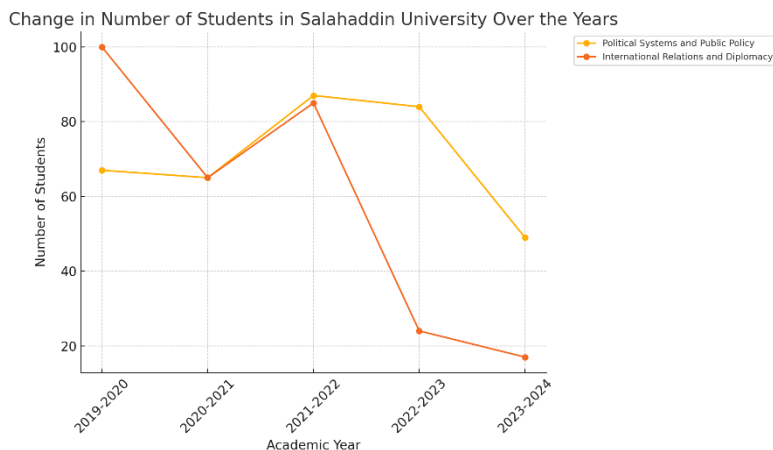


Figure 1: Students enrollment in political science and public policy department at Salahaddin University (MOHE-KRG, 2024).

Another difference is that the Political Systems and Public Policy department at Salahaddin University is taught in Kurdish. This has attracted more students than the IRD department, which is taught in English. Students of the former programme are mainly aim to work regionally and nationally, while students of the latter programme mainly aim to get diplomatic and internationally oriented careers. For that, they need to study in English language.

Consequently, most of the admissions into public universities, such as Salahaddin University, are coming from public schools, where the mode of study is in Kurdish language. Hence, the viability of having IRD departments in public universities taught in English was not there in the first place. Though the finding shows that the trend of all political science-related programmes is declining, the decline of the number of students of IRD departments in public universities, represented by the

biggest university in Kurdistan, Salahaddin University, is leading to the decline of such programmes.

The University of Sulaimani presents a slightly different pattern. The number of students at the Political Science department slightly changed throughout these years from 38 students in 2019-2020, decreased to 26 in 2022-2023, and then raised to 29 in 2023-2024. Despite unavailable data in the intervening years, the Politics and International Relations department showed a slight and steady increase from 40 in 2019-2020 to 55 in 2023-2024. Moreover, the Ministry of Higher Education could not provide the data for 2020-2021 since the data was unavailable due to some technical issues (MOHE-KRG, 2024).

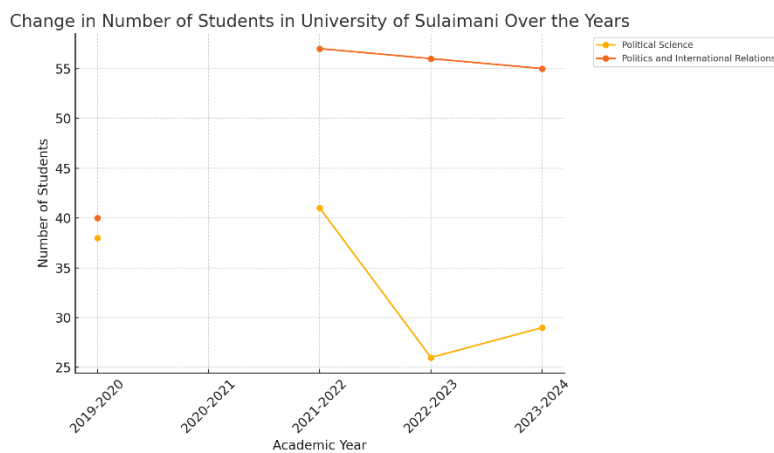
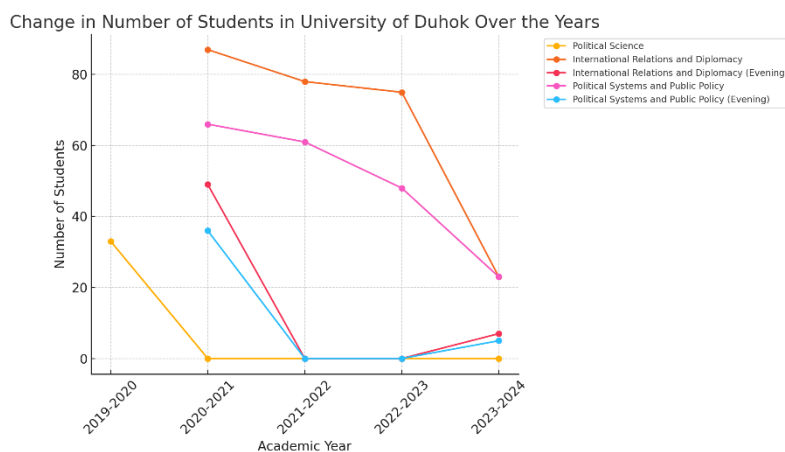


Figure 2: Students enrollment in departments of politics and international relations at Sulaimani University (MOHE-KRG, 2024).

Furthermore, The University of Duhok's data reveals a more dramatic decline, particularly in the Political Science department, which saw enrollment drop from 33 students in 2019-2020 to zero in subsequent years. The International Relations and Diplomacy department (daytime programme) maintained a higher enrollment, starting



with 87 students in 2020-2021 but gradually decreasing to 23 students by 2023-2024. The evening programme for the same department had low but consistent numbers, peaking at 49 students in 2020-2021 before dropping to 7 in 2023-2024. Similarly, the Political Systems and Public Policy department (daytime and evening programmes) also experienced a decline, with both programmes starting strong in 2020-2021 but falling to minimal enrollments by 2023-2024 (MOHE-KRG, 2024).

Figure 3: Students enrollment in the department of political science at Dohuk University (MOHE-KRG, 2024).

Moreover, At Soran University, the Politics and International Relations department also exhibited a downward trend, with enrollments falling from 37 in 2019-2020 to just 9 in 2023-2024. The evening program for this department showed virtually no enrollment in the first three years but saw a minimal uptick to 5 students in 2023-2024 (MOHE-KRG, 2024).

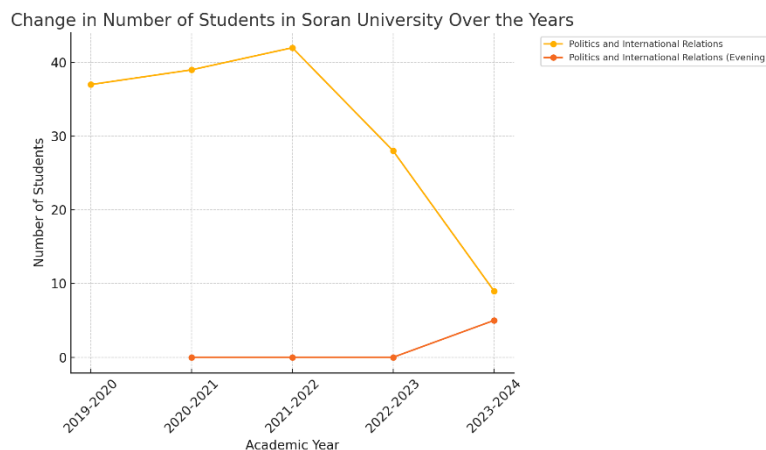


Figure 4: Students enrollment in the department of Politics and International Relations at Soran University (MOHE-KRG, 2024).

Hence, the data from Salahaddin University, University of Sulaimani, University of Duhok, and Soran University clearly illustrate a concerning decline in student enrollment in political science, international relations, and public policy departments over the past five years. This trend highlights the need for a strategic reassessment by academic institutions, policymakers, and the broader community to understand the underlying causes and develop interventions to revitalise interest in these crucial disciplines. Whether through curriculum reforms, enhanced career support, or broader societal changes, the importance of these fields must be recognised and promoted, ensuring that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq continues to produce well-educated, critically thinking individuals capable of contributing to the region's governance and international relations.

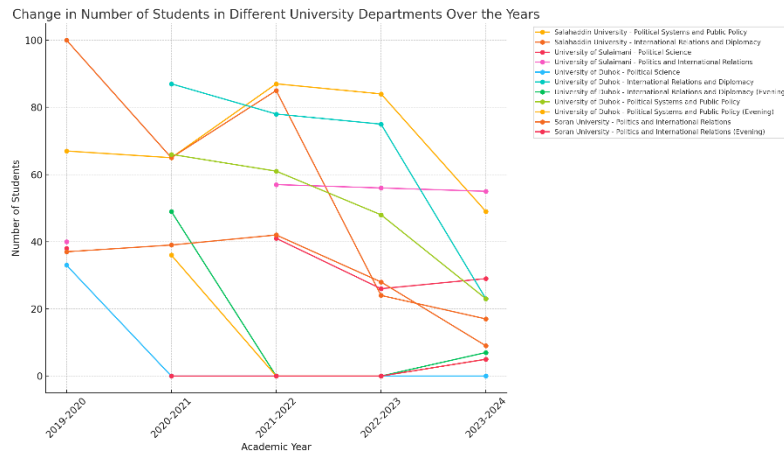


Figure 5: Changes in students' enrollment in the department of political science and international relations all over Kurdistan region universities (MOHE-KRG, 2024).

5. Conclusion

This research paper sheds light on the sharp decline in students' enrollment in the departments of International Relations and Political Science in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. There are several factors behind this trend, such as market demands, which greatly influence students' decisions as they prefer fields that guarantee job security after graduation. Another factor is the perception that career opportunities in International Relations are dominated by individuals with political party connections. This perception discourages students without such connections from entering the field. Moreover, societal and family expectations play a significant role. Families often steer students towards careers in engineering and medicine, viewing these fields as more prestigious and secure.

This decline has severe implications for governance, diplomacy, and societal stability. For instance, reduced enrollment limits the pool of skilled professionals available to address political challenges, undermining governance and policymaking effectiveness. In diplomacy, the lack of trained individuals impairs the region's ability to participate in international negotiations and uphold its interests globally. Societal stability is also at risk, as the shortage of experts in Political Science and International Relations can lead to an uninformed populace and weaker institutional frameworks, potentially exacerbating political and social crises.

The lack of attention to these departments also hinders universities' contributions to Goal 16 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which focuses on peace, justice, and strong institutions. An important region in the world, such as the Middle East, remains with insufficient focus on this goal, perpetuating multidimensional crises. Furthermore, the absence of such departments weakens the

commitment to Goal 4, which emphasizes quality education. These shortfalls highlight the urgent need to revitalize these fields of study.

In summary, the study identifies the key factors contributing to declining enrollment, including societal pressures, perceived limited career opportunities, and market demands. It emphasizes the broader implications of this decline, which include weakened governance, diminished diplomatic capabilities, and compromised societal stability. Addressing this issue is essential not only for the academic vitality of these programs but also for the region's political and social development.

6. Recommendation

The paper suggests below several recommendations that could help to mitigate the fall of students' enrolment in Political science and International Relations departments:

6.1 Enhancing Career Connection

The importance of connecting the Political Science and IR departments with the university's career center. This connection would facilitate stronger ties with alumni, helping current students gain insights and opportunities through internships and networking. Additionally, updating the department's curriculum to align with market requirements and introducing courses focused on practical skills would make graduates more competitive in the job market.

6.2 Rationalizing Department Numbers

The oversaturation of such departments across various cities, reflects negatively on the number of students and diminishes the perceived prestige of the field. Therefore, reducing the number of Political Science and International Relations departments, enhancing the quality of education, and making the field more exclusive and appealing.

6.3 Creating Governmental Links:

Establishing strong connections between the Political Science and International Relations departments and governmental institutions, such as the parliament, is crucial. By engaging in discussions with these institutions, universities can help facilitate job opportunities for graduates in political science and International Relations. This initiative would also highlight the practical importance of Political Science and International Relations expertise in governmental functions.

6.4 Activation of Job Titles:

The lack of specific job titles for Political Science and International Relations graduates is a significant deterrent for prospective students. Therefore, the paper advocates for the formal recognition and activation of job titles related to IR and political science, which would provide graduates with clearer career paths and greater motivation to enter the field.

6.5 Specializing Within the IR Field:

The paper recommends subdividing International Relations into minor specialties within the broader field, which would allow students to focus on specific areas of interest and develop expertise. This specialization would not only make the curriculum more relevant to students' career aspirations but also meet the diverse needs of the job market.

6.6 Raising Awareness Among High School Students:

There is a need to introduce and enlighten high school students about the International Relations field. Many students lack awareness of what studying Political Science and International Relations entails and the career opportunities it offers. Hence, Outreach programmes and informational sessions in high schools could help attract more students to the field.

6.7 Coordinating Student Admissions with Market Demands:

Lastly, the paper suggests that the Ministry of Higher Education should coordinate with universities to align student admissions across various departments and fields with market demand. This coordination would ensure a balanced supply of graduates in different fields, preventing oversaturation and enhancing job prospects for IR graduates.

6.8 Strategic Support for Diplomacy and Politics of KRG:

The Ministry of Higher Education and other relevant governmental departments need to address this issue from a strategic national perspective that supports these departments in admission and continuity, ultimately enhancing the future of politics and diplomacy in the KRG.

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