Challenges faced by Iraqi academics in career advancement and promotion
A survey-based study
Zainab Atiyah Dakhil, Moatamn Skuk and May Al-Jorani

Abstract
Considering the lack of data from Iraq on the challenges faced by academics regarding academic advancement, we aimed to explore the main challenges faced by academic faculty members in Iraq in achieving academic advancement and promotion. A cross-sectional 24-item Google form survey was shared via social media; 130 Iraqi academics responded. Lack of research funding and poor research infrastructure were the most common barriers for academic advancement. Most academics agreed that the cost of promotion requirements is considered a lot compared to their income. This is the first study that has explored this issue in Iraq and suggests future strategies to overcome these barriers.

Keywords
academia, career enhancement, developing world, higher education, Iraq, Middle East

Wars and political unrest in Iraq have led to many highly qualified academics leaving the country. This has impacted negatively on mentorship opportunities for younger academics with subsequent impacts on their academic career and progress. At the same time, the number of Iraqi universities has reached thirty-six governmental universities and seventy private sector universities. The huge increase in students attending universities in Iraq has not been accompanied by proper increase in staff or building capacities, so it is common for the Iraqi academics to work extra hours mainly on teaching with limited or no dedicated time for research. The government has not implemented the law of 2014 that established payments for publications in high-impact journals and set limits on teaching hours.
In Iraqi universities, there is insufficient up-to-date training for teaching and research. There is also no funding via research centres to support scientific studies, and there is insufficient access to the technical network to meet required needs. All these factors play a role in delaying the developmental abilities of scientific education (King 2004).

Academic staff satisfaction, knowledge and access to communication technology and funds have a major role in the growth and progress of scientific research and ultimately publications output (Jameel and Ahmad 2020). There have been no improvements in research infrastructure in Iraq, no financial support for research work nor funds for conference registration, travel grants or publication in high-impact journals. Yet the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education allocates high credits to publication in Scopus-indexed journals during the yearly academic evaluation for each member of the faculty and high credits for participating in high-impact global conferences. Such a paradox is devastating because simply, the government pays nothing and wants to improve their higher education institutes’ global ranking by burdening the academics who are paying all these fees and costs out of their pockets. It literally forces Iraqi academics to pay for everything otherwise their academic promotions will be delayed, and their yearly academic evaluation will be remarkably lower.

Activities such as reviewing papers and grant applications are important measures for the academic success of the scientific researcher (Baumann et al. 2020). In Spain, research accomplishments and productivity among Spanish authors have been significantly raised through funding development (Butler 2004). It is valuable to study such successful reports so that Iraq might benefit from other governments’ earlier experiences.

The alarming increase in global problems, threats and diseases, means governments everywhere will need to turn to their researchers for solutions (King 2004). It is crucial to recognise that many of these global threats are more common and have the most devastating impacts in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), for example, food insecurity, heavy burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases in the presence of poor healthcare systems, cultural, economic, and educational challenges besides wars and internal conflicts in many LMICs (Siriwardhana 2015). In response to such challenges there is a need to increase academic research and science to generate real world research-driven solutions. Yet there has been no observed increase in academic and scientific contributions in LMICs despite them being the home of 85 per cent of the world
population. Only two per cent of publications in indexed journals come from LMICs (Rahman et al. 2020; Salager-Meyer 2008). Such low rate of scientific work not only reflects lack of knowledge about and work on these countries’ problems but also negatively impacts the careers and academic advancement of researchers from these countries. There is a lack of data from LMICs in general and from Iraq in particular on the challenges faced by academics regarding research careers and academic advancement. So, this study aimed to explore the main challenges faced by academic faculty members in Iraq in conducting research and achieving academic advancement and promotions.

Methods

This is a cross sectional study designed to include academic teachers working in Iraq. A 24-item Google form (17 close-ended questions and 7 open-ended questions) was shared via social media (Iraqi academic Facebook and Telegram groups). The questions were designed in the Arabic language and intended to evaluate the following:

1. Demographic characteristics of participants: age, gender, education, and academic title (close-ended questions)
2. The main barriers faced by participants in conducting research and publications (close- and open-ended questions)
3. Participants’ perspectives regarding the academic promotion process (with 5-point Likert scales were used to quantitatively evaluate participants’ perspectives)
4. Participants’ recommendations to improve academic advancement in Iraq (open-ended question)

The survey was carried out during the period of September 2020 to April 2021. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the survey items results. IBM SPSS statistics version 28 was used for statistical analysis. Frequencies were expressed as percentages. Categorial variables were compared using Chi square test. P value was considered significant if <0.05.

The study is compliant with the national ethical protocols. A paragraph at the start of the survey explained to the participants the objectives of the study and that their progress with the survey means that they are consenting to participating in the survey. It was also stated that their personal
responses will not be shared nor used except for the purpose of analysis of the study and that this analysis will be presented as a scientific publication.

Results

A total of 131 participants responded to the survey, one response was excluded as it was from an academic affiliation outside Iraq. The age of the respondents that ranged between 36 and 45 years was recorded as 55.38 per cent; 55.4 per cent of respondents were female. A PhD was the highest qualification for 54.6 per cent while 42.3 per cent had an MSc degree. The most common academic title held by the participants was lecturer (50.8 per cent); see Table 1.

The processing of the last promotion for respondents (in general) required less than six months in 35.4 per cent of cases, twelve months in 29.2 per cent and eighteen months in 13.1 per cent. When the gender of academics is considered, the promotion process required less than 6 months for 41.1 per cent of male academics as opposed to 30.6 per cent of female academics, 12 months for 25.9 per cent of males and 31.9 per cent of females and 18 months for 15.5 per cent of males and 11.1 per cent of females (p=0.437).

Lack of research funding and poor research infrastructure were the most reported barriers to research career advancement (64.6 per cent and 58.5 per cent, respectively), see Figure 1. Most academics strongly agreed or agreed that the cost of promotion requirements (as determined by the universities and Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research) is considered a lot compared to their income, this perception differed according to age. More academics between 30 and 40 years of age agreed about the financial burden of academic promotion compared to those aged 40 to 55 (p=0.001).

The respondents' academic title also impacted on their perception of the high financial burden of promotion requirements. 38.5 per cent and 53.8 per cent of assistant lecturers, 60.6 per cent and 30.3 per cent of lecturers and 63.6 per cent and 18.2 per cent of assistant professors strongly agreed or agreed that the cost of promotion requirements is considered a lot compared to their financial income (p=0.008).

Respondents' highest education also affected the perception of high cost of the promotion requirements, as 40 per cent and 38.2 per cent of master's degree holders versus 43.7 per cent and 29.6 per cent of PhD degree holders strongly agreed or agreed that the cost of promotion requirements is considered a lot compared to their financial income (p=0.023).
Table 1. Baseline characteristics of academics participating in the survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Number (Total=130)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (Years)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–35</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36–45</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>55.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46–55</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>23.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56–70</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td>72</td>
<td>55.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postdoctoral</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>54.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Title</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>50.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant lecturer</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No academic title yet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Barriers facing Iraqi academics to advance their research career and publishing
Most of the respondents disagreed that the scoring system of the promotion requirement is objective and realistic. This differed with respondents’ academic title as 61.6 per cent of assistant lecturers, 72.7 per cent of lecturers, 63.6 per cent of assistant professors and 50 per cent of professors disagreed with scoring system objectivity (p=0.005).

Apart from the forementioned points, there were no differences in perceptions of the academics regarding academic promotion and career advancement (see Figure 2) according to age, gender, highest education or current academic title (p>0.05).

Making new guidelines and protocols for the academic promotion requirement was suggested by 34.61 per cent of respondents to improve academic advancement in Iraq, while providing research funding was suggested by 10 per cent of respondents, see Figure 3.

Figure 2. Academics’ perceptions regarding the academic advancement and promotion process

Figure 3. Academics’ proposed recommendations to improve the academic advancement in Iraq
Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that assesses the challenges faced by Iraqi academics in their research careers and academic advancement. It revealed that lack of research funding and research infrastructure are the main factors hindering researchers’ careers. Unjustified administrative barriers in the promotion process and the heavy burden of duties are strongly perceived as barriers for promotion in Iraq. Updating promotion guidelines and protocols was the most reported suggestion to improve academic advancement.

About a quarter of respondents were older than forty-five years of age. In Iraq, like in other developing countries, most postgraduate degree holders are significantly older than their peers in developed countries while their age of obligatory retirement are much lower than in developed countries (Ngadaya et al. 2019). The Iraqi government decided in October 2019 to reduce the obligatory retirement age to sixty years for general employees (including doctors and academics with the academic titles of assistant lecturers and lecturers) and sixty-three years for academics with the academic titles of assistant professors and professors (Lee 2019) regardless of their degree, specialty, outstanding contributions or how needed they are in their institutions. This decision, together with the failure of universities to find ways of retaining the services of retired academics, has caused dramatic brain-drain in the higher education system, with experienced and productive academics being lost. Such brain-drains and the loss of experts and mentors are critical challenges for the academic growth of the new generations.

The current study revealed that lack of funding and inadequate research infrastructure were the most commonly reported barriers to research. These results agree with those of many researchers in developing countries (Dakhil et al. 2024; Karimian et al. 2012; Majumder 2004). In a Saudi study assessing barriers to clinical research, time constraints and administrative duties were the most reported barriers (Al Kindy 2021). In an African study that investigated barriers to clinical research, the absence of research teams and lack of internet access were the most reported barriers (Conradie et al. 2018). Financial constraints to research and academic publications include limited resources to conduct studies and, to a lesser degree, the compensation for research work (Conradie et al. 2018) coupled with the article processing charges (APCs) which are commonly more than the salary of a researcher from a developing country (Siriwardhana 2015).
Iraq is an oil-rich country, yet the average yearly salary of a faculty member in Iraq is 16,879 USD while in the USA it ranges from 69,206 to 102,402 USD and in the UK it ranges from 59,863 to 113,263 USD. In another oil-rich Arab country, the UAE, the average salary for an academic professor is 104,808 USD (Academic Positions n.d.; Economic Research Institute n.d.; Glassdoor 2024). Coupled with this salary gap, researchers in developed countries are well-funded by their institutes for research infrastructure (laboratory requirements, kits, tools, etc.), APCs and conference attendance, while in Iraq, all these accomplishments are paid out of the researchers’ pocket with no governmental budget for science and research at all (Fakhir 2012).

Around half of the respondents in our study perceived lack of internationally indexed Iraqi journals as a barrier to conducting research and publication. At the time of writing this manuscript and according to the Scopus database (Scopus Preview 2024) and Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research website (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research n.d.), there are twenty Iraqi journals indexed in Scopus across several scientific and social specialties and another seven journals indexed in Scopus according to the Ministry of Higher Education’s website but not reported yet on Scopus’ website. These indexed Iraqi journals cover different fields, yet their number of issues are limited as seen in Table 2.

According to one study (Macháček and Srholec 2022), Iraqi researchers published almost 13 per cent of their total indexed articles in predatory journals between 2015 and 2017, the third highest proportion in the world. That implies that Iraqi researchers are paying millions of dollars to predatory publishers. Iraqi policymakers and institutional decision makers bear some responsibility for this scientific and economic catastrophe by failing to support the national journals.

The system of academic promotion should provide a mechanism for academics’ achievements to be recognised and acknowledged, but if the system itself is not standardised, it can create or reflect inequalities with certain persons promoted more readily than others (Sadiq et al. 2019). Accordingly, our respondents suggested forming non-misinterpretable promotion protocols to end biased decisions by members of promotion committees. The majority of participants did not believe that the current promotion scoring system was objective or appropriate. But instead of recommending improvements in the conditions for research, around a third of them advocated for new promotion guidelines that took into account the low level of the
Table 2. Iraqi Journals indexed in the Scopus database

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Article Processing Charges (APC) requirement</th>
<th>Quartile</th>
<th>Number of issues per year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karbala International Journal of Modern Science</td>
<td>No APC</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baghdad Science Journal</td>
<td>No APC</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi Journal of Veterinary Sciences</td>
<td>No APC</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi Journal for Computer Science and Mathematics</td>
<td>No APC</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi Journal of Agricultural Sciences</td>
<td>No APC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi Geological Journal</td>
<td>No APC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 International well-known authors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Syrian authors (A special case due to the circumstances of this country)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Authors who gain high citations in the journal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi Journal of Science</td>
<td>APC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basrah Journal of Agricultural Sciences</td>
<td>APC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi Journal of Pharmaceutical Sciences</td>
<td>APC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulletin of the Iraq Natural History Museum</td>
<td>APC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 (but in 2022 it had 2 issues)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi Journal of Applied Physics</td>
<td>APC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kufa Journal for Agricultural Sciences</td>
<td>APC (discounted for international authors)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi National Journal of Earth Science</td>
<td>APC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Journal of Babylon</td>
<td>APC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Rafidain Journal of Medical Science</td>
<td>APC</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Anbar Medical Journal</td>
<td>APC applied for Iraqi researchers but not for other nationalities</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Engineering and Sustainable Development</td>
<td>APC</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi Journal for Electrical and Electronic Engineering</td>
<td>APC applied to all articles submitted after 1/1/2024</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
institutional infrastructure. This suggests that academics have lost trust in their system’s ability to provide funding for research or to establish proper academic infrastructure.

Most academics argued that the unjustified administrative barriers hindered their promotion process. More efficient electronic systems for recording research and academic achievements would reduce the time and effort currently spent on filling in paper forms that need to be printed off and delivered by hand.

Respondents agreed that certain factors are under-emphasised in the promotion requirements such as teaching skills and performance quality. These skills are the cornerstone of the work of the higher education system, yet they are not appreciated in the promotion scoring of the academic faculty. Globally there is concern that some factors are over-emphasised in the tenure and promotion process, like student evaluation of academic faculty members despite it being imperfect assessment tool (Boring et al. 2016; Murray et al. 2020; Vega and Hengartner 2021) while other factors are underestimated, such as teaching and academic services (Gentry and Stokes 2015).

Almost three-quarters of female respondents (73.6 per cent) suggested that maternity leave halted their academic progress. In Iraq, there are no part-time or flexible academic positions, nor provision such as nurseries for academic mothers, making women who take maternal leave to care for their babies experience a total stop in their academic clock and achievements. Gender segregation, financial constraints and lack of mentorship and support all contribute to hindering women’s progress in academia in Iraq. To help women to successfully climb the academic ladder, we need to enhance mentorship and avoid burnout (Zimmermann 2019). In Iraq, establishing part-time positions should be considered to allow women to stay in the academic game.

In summary, the current study suggests that governmental, institutional and financial factors contribute to hindering academic careers in Iraq. With losing hope in future development and trust in the current system and policy makers, the main recommendation suggested by academics is to change the promotion guidelines and requirements to be applicable and achievable in the existing limited-resource settings where they serve.
Suggested strategies to promote academic careers in Iraq

We are proposing that the following steps be taken by policy makers, institutions and academics to mitigate the existing barriers:

**Policy makers**

- Implement the Iraqi University Act, especially regarding research awards and quorum hours.
- Treat research budgets as necessities, not luxuries.
- Provide minimum required infrastructure for research.
- Arrange collaboration between universities, ministries and other organisations to enable research results to be used to improve society’s affairs.
- Increase the number of scholarships, fellowships and academic exchange programmes to facilitate global networking and research collaboration.

**Institutions**

- Set up non-biased promotion committees with clear non-misinterpretable promotion guidelines.
- Remove administrative barriers to promotion processes by using effective online portals for submitting and tracking applications.
- Offer research grants and travel grants in collaboration with national and international societies, industry and commerce.
- Nurture the talents of undergraduate students through joint research groups with academic faculty.
- Assign credits to academic staff for service work and administrative duties.
- Apply clear job descriptions to each academic position and avoid space filling of academic duties.
- Support national academic journals in partnership with well-known publishers and appoint global experts in each field as editorial board members and reviewers.

**Academics**

- Undertake applied research in order to solve existing problems.
- Avoid redundant work and repetition of research ideas.
• Do not look for shortcuts; publishing in prestigious journals takes time.
• Search for prestigious hybrid or closed-access journals where no APCs are requested.
• Assign time for research work.
• Say ‘no’ when necessary; team spirit is great but never do the work of others.
• Participate in virtual high-impact global conferences.
• Seek educational and travel grants by entering global competitions held by international companies and organisations.

Further studies are needed to evaluate the overall factors and barriers faced by Iraqi academic researchers and students in implementing scientific research and keeping up with global rankings. A long-term study that involves public and private universities is needed to correctly measure the potential areas to work on, the needs and methods to empower the educational and research environment in Iraq.

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Note

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