

A Policy Paper Research: A Research Aimed at Offering Solutions to the Practical Problems of the KRG

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Abstract

A policy paper research is a type of research conducted to solve a practical organizational problem. It guides authorities and decision-makers in making smarter decisions. There are various methods of preparing a policy paper, with the authors of the present paper having used a SWOT analysis, which stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Upon reading policy papers based on a SWOT analysis, authorities will have a detailed overview of a practical problem. This will improve the effectiveness of using organizational resources, thereby reducing the rate of possible errors. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), as a government structure, needs to use this scientific approach to solve its problems practically. Most of the studies conducted by KRG universities have not addressed possible practical proposals, yet they have focused mainly on the theoretical aspects of problems. Against this background, this research tries to focus on introducing a policy paper based on a SWOT analysis for KRG researchers. The principal idea in preparing a policy paper is to focus on a practical problem and propose the best solution to it. Developing a policy paper is an academic task, so it needs to be prepared using a scientific methodology. It is expected that upon an increase in the number of policy paper research at KRG universities and associated research centers, the decision-making process will be easier, more intelligent, and more efficient. In that event, the KRG will be developed more rapidly as a government structure.

1. Introduction

There is an urgent need felt for conducting research at research universities and institutes located in the KRG aimed at solving the practical problems of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Hence, the present research tries to introduce 'policy papers' to the academicians of the KRG. Firstly, the structure of a policy paper and its components will be introduced in brief. The major and most sensitive parts of a policy paper, being the executive summary, problem description, and policy options, will be explained, and finally conclusions and recommendations will be presented. Next, one of the prevalent analytical methods in policy papers titled as the 'SWOT analysis method' as well as the method of applying it in designing a 'matrix of quadruple strategies' will be explained.

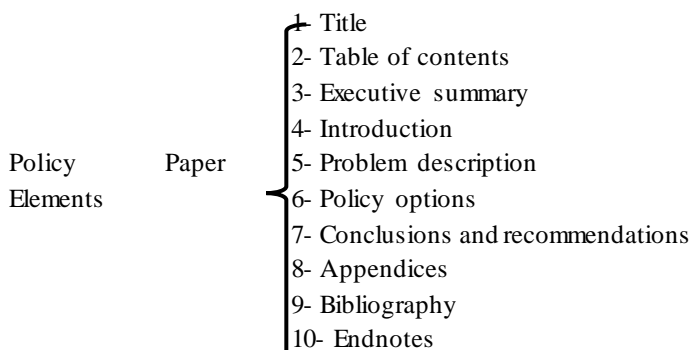
To understand the application of policy papers better and more in detail, an instance of using the structure of policy papers as well as a SWOT analysis method will be explained step by step to provide practical solutions to the educational planning problem at the higher education universities and institutes of the KRG. Developing this general plan can result in a

comprehensive policy paper to be presented to decision-makers at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHE). In the general plan to be presented to MHE decision-makers, the practical problems of educational planning have been assessed from the three perspectives of ‘the needs of the society and citizens’, ‘the needs of the private sector’, and ‘the needs of the KRG’, with various strategies assessed from the three mentioned perspectives. After presenting the practical example, three solutions will be offered, and considering the quadruple strategies and the three needs mentioned above, the proposed options will be categorized.

2. The structure of a policy paper

A policy paper is a type of research conducted to solve a practical problem and prepared to provide various solutions to decision-makers. The results of a policy paper research should be practicable, abstract issues must not be presented in it, and it should be focused on coming up with recommendations to solve a problem. In addition, it is required that the statements used in a policy paper be short and simple. Besides, the use of technical and difficult terms should be avoided because even though this type of research is professional and academic in nature, it addresses those decision-makers who may not hold higher education degrees or technical knowledge about the subject of the research paper (Eoin Young, 2002).

The following chart shows the common structural elements of a policy paper:



Policy papers can be divided into the two general categories of ‘policy studies’ and ‘policy analyses’. A policy study targets other policy specialists and can be quite discipline, with its length being probably up to 20,000 words, while a policy analysis addresses decision-makers and must be quite clear and simple, usually not being longer than 5,000 words. The first element of a policy paper is the ‘title’ which should capture readers’ attention and provide them with a quick overview of the subject and the problem to be addressed in the policy paper. The ‘table of contents’ comes next, which is the outline or overview of the policy paper and consists of a system of headings and subheadings that shows not only the overall organization of the paper, but also the main sections and their subsections (Eoin Young, 2002).

In the next part, the ‘executive summary’ is presented, which is a very significant element of a policy paper. The executive summary consists of 5% of the total size of a policy paper, in which a summary of all principal contents of a policy paper, including the objectives, statement of the problem, statement of solutions, assessment of various solutions, conclusions, and finally recommendations are presented. In some policy papers, similar to other scientific papers, this section is presented under the tile of ‘Abstract’. The next section is the ‘introduction’. The introduction of a policy paper, like that of other scientific papers, introduces the context of the

subject to the readers and alludes to the research problem, methodological issues, as well as research limitations. ‘Problem description’ is the next part that comes after the introduction in which the context of the research problem, necessary explanations about the current policy, and the current status of the environment in which the problems exists are presented.

The section of ‘Policy options’ comes next, which is one of the fundamental and central parts of every policy paper. The ‘current policy analysis’ is a part of the proposing of policy options, which is a basic skill for understanding organizational issues and suggesting appropriate solutions to problems. “Policy Analysis Practice (PAE) is a skill used in examining and developing solutions to a public or a nonprofit-sector policy, or a management issue raised by a client organization” (Harvard Kennedy School, 2019).

The element of ‘policy options’ presents an argument for the preferred policy alternative based on the assessment of all possible alternatives. It outlines, evaluates, and compares possible alternatives to a policy. In the meantime, it provides a convincing argument for the preferred policy alternative, focuses on reporting the resulting decision, and builds a clear and consistent link to the policy paper’s findings and recommendations (Eoin Young, 2002).

The process of designing and providing various policy options is also of great importance, usually being an interactive process aimed at providing the most possible options for solving a problem.

“The following five steps have been proposed to identify a realistic set of options, including (1) constructing a baseline from which the impact of policy options will be assessed, (2) starting the task by compiling a wide range of alternative policy options, (3) identifying the most viable options, (4) double checking the suitability of the retained policy options, and (5) describing in detail the key aspects of the retained policy options to allow for an in-depth analysis of the related impacts” (European Commission, 2019).

‘Conclusions and recommendations’ are the last fundamental and sensitive elements of a policy paper. In this section, it is necessary that a logical and professional deduction of the major findings of the policy paper be made and recommendations be expressed quite clearly. In order of making a logical and professional deduction of the findings, it is necessary that the sections of ‘problem description’ and ‘policy options’ be integrated in the section of ‘recommendation’. In addition, in the section of ‘conclusions’, it must be clarified how and why every recommendation can be related to a part or the whole of a described problem.

To persuade the readers that the recommendations proposed offer the best means of solving the policy problem, it is crucial that the recommendations be clear, practical, convincing, logical, and comprehensive. In general, the practical solution to a policy problem is a strategy, so no single recommendation will provide a comprehensive solution. Therefore, writers usually divide recommendations into separate proposals, with each addressing one aspect of the problem and solution. Some writers choose to include some brief concluding remarks to close the argument developed throughout the policy paper (Eoin Young, 2002).

Upon the completion of the main body of the policy paper, additional information can be mentioned in the sections of ‘Appendices’, ‘Bibliography’, and ‘Endnotes’.

3. SWOT analysis: One of the common methods used in policy papers

There are some analysis methods, including SWOT, PEST, and PESTAL, which can be used in analyzing data and choosing appropriate strategies to be recommended in a policy paper. PEST focuses on how political, economic, social, and technological factors affect the feasibility of a policy option. It can be developed to PESTAL, which focuses on political, economic, social, technological, administrative, and legal factors. In this research, the SWOT method was utilized, for it is more commonly used in the analysis method of policy papers (Herman, 2013).

In the SWOT analysis method, concepts are classified into the four major groups of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Strengths are the benefits an organization derives in doing a job, being superior in quality over others, including internal resources, such as skilled staff and tangible assets, like capital and properties. Weaknesses are opposite to strengths and imply the lack of organization, benefits derived by other organizations, and various types of resource constraints. Opportunities indicate that there are few competitors, underserved fields, or emerging needs for the services of the organization. In the end, threats imply the occurrence of changes to the organizational environment, which are against the interests of the organization.

Table 1. SWOT Analysis

	Helpful in achieving the goal	Harmful to achieving the goal
Internal origin (the organization)	Strengths	Weaknesses
External origin (the environment)	Opportunities	Threats

According to table 1, four major thinking strategies can be developed, namely the SO, WO, ST, and WT strategies, as shown in Table 2. The SO strategy is an ideal strategy that an organization can adopt, for there are organizational strengths that can be used to take environmental opportunities. In contrast, the WO strategy utilizes external options to offset internal weaknesses. The WT strategy is a defensive strategy adopted aimed at reducing internal weaknesses and

avoiding external environmental threats. In the end, the ST strategy refers to the use of organizational benefits to avoid or mitigate the impact of external threats (Cheng, 2013).

Table 2. The combination matrix of SWOT analysis for developing strategies (Cheng, 2013)

Disadvantage-opportunity strategy (WO)	Advantage-opportunity strategy (SO)
(WO) is a turnaround strategy that uses external opportunities to overcome disadvantages.	(SO) is a growth strategy that uses external opportunities and utilizes advantages in full.
Disadvantage-threat strategy (WT)	Advantage-threat strategy (ST)
(WT) is a defensive strategy that overcomes disadvantages and avoids external threats.	(ST) is a diversification strategy that shows superiority to avoid external threats.

4. The policy paper structure to address a practical problem of higher education in the KRG

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHE) is one of the 19 ministries of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq. The MHE develops the higher education master plan and regulations for 16 public universities, 19 private universities, and 14 private institutes (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2019). The admission process of high school graduates to the universities located in the Kurdistan region is under the control of the MHE, with this ministry being responsible for determining the admission capacity of each discipline for every university and institute. The authors of the present paper considered the apparent imbalance that exists currently between the theoretical and practical disciplines of all public and private universities and institutes located in the Kurdistan region. In this respect, this study describes a policy paper structure to analyze the imbalance problem in higher education disciplines using the SWOT analysis method so as to clarify the current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the MHE's ongoing policy. Next, it will produce an integrated matrix of development strategies and finally recommend some policy options for MHE decision-makers.

4.1. Problem description in the sample policy paper

There are almost 50 public and private universities and institutes in the Kurdistan region. In the academic year of 2016-2017, public universities and institutes admitted about 31,000 students for bachelor's degree programs (Hassan, 2016). This number rose up to 39,000 students in the academic year of 2018-2019 (Rojnews, 2018). The students admitted to educate at KRG universities and institutes study in various fields, including humanities, sciences, agriculture, and medical sciences. Meanwhile, about 30,000 students graduate every year, with most of them being unable to find a job, leading to a rise in the KRG unemployment rate (Ferman, 2018).

The key issue on which the structure of this policy paper has focused is the high rate of student admission in theoretical fields, with the students' low chance of getting employed in the private sector; hence, the graduates of theoretical fields will be added to the unemployed population. The highest number of undergraduate disciplines at public KRG universities is related to the fields of humanities and basic sciences with a focus on theoretical education or teacher training, which require employment by the government, with the ability of the students of these fields being very limited to use their knowledge in the labor market in the private sector.

In addition, private universities and institutes that have assigned a greater number of disciplines to the applied fields face other serious problems in terms of educational levels and quality. The majority of these universities have ranked 'low' or 'very low' in the rankings of higher education universities and institutes (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2018). Although these universities and institutes have focused more on applied disciplines than public universities have done, their educational levels have often been lower than the undergraduate level (high school diplomas or associates' degrees), with a low educational quality. In addition, the majority of the individuals admitted to these institutes are those who have not succeeded in obtaining the minimum average grades of high school courses, which is 65 out of 100 for being admitted to public universities (General Directorate of Planning and Follow up, 2018). The admission of the individuals of a poor educational background and possibly lower academic qualifications to applied disciplines at universities and institutes of a low educational quality can lead to the inadequate expertise level of graduates in such disciplines, which will undermine the abilities of these individuals to meet the private sector's requirements and their employment in this sector.

The most urgent higher education needs that the Kurdistan region should address are divided into the three general categories of the public health of KRG citizens, the developing economic sector, and the needs of the KRG itself in terms of modernization. Due to the low level of public health services, the KRG people have to go on costly international trips to neighboring countries, such as Turkey, Iran, and Jordan or other European countries to receive medical treatment. Only concerning Iran, every year more than 370 thousand individuals enter Iran from Iraq in order to receive medical services (Alkawthar, 2017). Although the exact share of this number belonging to KRG citizens is not clear, given the ratio of the Kurds to the total Iraqi population, it is likely that about 20% of this number, i.e. approximately 54,000 of them, be the KRG citizens. Hence, the improvement and development of the disciplines connected with public health are from among the KRG citizens' fundamental needs. In addition, the economic sector of the KRG needs to employ skilled workforce who can act in various fields in terms of producing and distributing goods and services, as well as regulating economic relations with commercial and industrial parties at an international level. As a result, the KRG needs to provide training in academic disciplines connected with the major industries at higher levels and of superior quality to develop major industries and link them to the growing economic sector. To achieve modernization objectives and transition from the traditional administrative system to a modern administrative system, the KRG itself is required to use specialists who are provided with higher education degrees to establish the electronic government. Under these circumstances, the present policy paper utilizes the SWOT method to analyze the current status of higher education in the KRG and

then proposes possible strategies to match educational planning with the needs of the society, economy, and the KRG.

4.2. Policy options in the sample policy paper: An analysis of the current status of higher education in the KRG has been illustrated in table 3.

Table 3. The SWOT analysis of the current status of higher education in the KRG

	Helpful in achieving goals	Harmful to achieving goals
Internal origin (the organization)	Strengths - Sufficient educational space - Flexibility in educational planning	Weaknesses - Lack of professional academic staff - lack of experience to integrate private needs with educational planning
External origin (the environment)	Opportunities - Increasing the dependence of the private sector on professional and educated workforce - Developing private and public sectors that can create new job opportunities	Threats - Political interventions in educational planning - Security instability

According to the SWOT analysis table, the possible quadruple strategies can be designed as follows:

- In the SO strategy, organizational capabilities are used in exploiting environmental opportunities. By implementing the SO strategy, the sufficient educational opportunities and flexible educational planning available in the KRG can be used in such a way that within the time period of 4 to 6 years, the specialized workforce needed by the private sector, the public health sector, and the KRG itself will be provided. By following this strategy, the private sector will create new employment opportunities for graduates to work in it, and the education sector will educate specialized and capable workforce able to meet the professional and modern needs of the private sector in various fields. In addition, the citizens' need for public health services will turn investment in this field into a lucrative and productive task. The government itself needs to employ a part of specialized graduates to increase its productivity and become more modernized.
- In the WO strategy, the organization uses external opportunities to minimize internal weaknesses. In this case, to compensate for the shortage of specialized workforce and to

overcome the problem of the lack of experience in educational planning in line with meeting the private sector's needs, the higher education sector of the KRG can use the private sector's assets to recruit specialized external workforce. It seems that the higher education sector of the KRG, by giving permission to establish private universities and institutes, has been trying to provide incentives to overcome this weakness and use market opportunities for the recruitment of higher education graduates. Hence, the current higher education system of the Kurdistan region seems to have been trying in recent years to use external environmental opportunities to overcome the internal weaknesses enumerated; as a result, the WO strategy has been implemented.

- In the ST strategy, organizational strengths are utilized to avoid external threats or reduce their influence. In order of implementing this strategy, the MHE of the Kurdistan region needs to develop a culture for political parties in terms of the need for independence in educational planning to achieve national goals so as to reduce the level of the parties' influence in educational planning. To cushion the negative effects of security instabilities, it seems that making use of positive propaganda, the MHE will be able to assure foreign workforces and assets that security instabilities are provisional, to be evaded in the near future. In conclusion, the ST strategy is a long-term strategy that can be implemented by means of cultural and promotional tools.
- In the end, the WT strategy is a viable strategy and a type of defensive strategy aimed at reducing internal weaknesses and avoiding the threats of the external environment. To implement this strategy, the MHE of the Kurdistan region requires the cooperation of parties and attraction of the private sector's capital through the use of powerful and influential individuals working at the Ministry to reduce the parties' political influence and compensate for a part of the shortage of specialized workforce. Many of the academicians present at the MHE are quite influential in their respective parties and have a high capacity for doing academic activities; hence, using these individuals could be effective in reducing internal weaknesses and avoiding the threats of the external environment.

Considering the SWOT analysis conducted and the designing of the 'matrix of strategies', the following options can be presented for the KRG and the MHE:

- **Option one:** A significant decrease in admitting students in theoretical disciplines and the maximal allocation of public and private educational opportunities to applied disciplines; Given that there is no suitable and quick solution to recruiting the human resources present in the field of teaching theoretical courses, having this option implemented can exert some pressure on the government. In addition, considering the lack of sufficient specialized human resources to fulfil the needs of applied disciplines, the implementation of this option will probably give rise to a reduction in the education quality. Nevertheless, in the case of an improvement in economic conditions and an increase in the KRG's budget, the use of specialized foreign workforce will solve the problem of the lack of specialized workforce.

- **Option two:** The continual and gradual admission of students in theoretical disciplines and increasing the allocation of opportunities to applied disciplines;

This option will be possibly implemented by planning for the prevention of an increase in the graduates of theoretical disciplines. In addition, the employment of foreign specialized forces is necessary to increase the education quality in applied disciplines in the higher education.

- **Option three:** Dividing educational opportunities so that most of the public sector's educational opportunities will be assigned to disciplines required by public administrations, and most of the private sector's educational opportunities will be allocated to the needs of the private sector;

Considering that the individuals admitted to private universities and institutes have lower educational qualifications, the implementation of this option may not meet the private sector's needs in the future. However, by providing facilities for talented individuals who are not financially capable of using private institutes as well as developing educational standards of a higher quality, the quality and number of disciplines required by the private sector could be increased. In the meantime, educational planning must be done in such a way that most of public educational opportunities will be devoted to the fields needed by the e-government and the modernization of the government's administrative structure.

4.3. Recommendations and conclusions of the sample policy paper

Considering current conditions and having evaluated strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, the authors of this policy paper recommend that the KRG's Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research considers the second option as the top priority of its educational policy. Upon doing educational planning for implementing the second proposed option, the growing economic pressure on the government to recruit the unemployed graduates of theoretical disciplines will be reduced, and meanwhile, the developing private sector will gain access to the specialized workforce that will increase its competitiveness and productivity in the global economy. To better implement this option, it is required that macroeconomic planning necessary for the strengthening of major industries and the e-government be done, and the basic needs of the KRG society be fulfilled in the field of public health so that social conditions and governmental planning will be provided for the consolidation of the KRG's economic foundations. From among the applied disciplines that play a crucial role in boosting major industries, with the ability to recruit workforce in the private sector, fulfil the KRG society's needs in the field of public health, and require more attention from the MHE, one can refer to the disciplines of mining, electricity, electronics, agriculture, computer science, IT, banking, management, as well as various fields of medicine, paramedics, and psychology.

Despite suggesting option two as the most appropriate option to the decision-makers of the KRG's Ministry of Higher Education, the authors of this policy paper regard option three as the next suitable option in importance. However, in case of the presence of sufficient capacity and ability in the MHE and the KRG to apply rapid changes, and in the event of the presence of the ability to deal with the executive consequences of option one, this option can also be regarded as an option that will change the educational system's direction more quickly than the two other ones do, in line with the requirements of the government and the private sector.

Researchers believe that inattention to the general health needs of the KRG citizens, as well as the needs of the private sector and the government could in the long run lead to dire political, social, and economic consequences for the KRG. Therefore, researchers recommend that KRG decision-makers integrate educational planning with economic planning, and meanwhile, be attentive to the KRG citizens' public health needs.

5. Conclusions

The present study was conducted aimed at introducing a type of research titled 'policy paper' in order to solve the practical problems of the KRG. In this research, the structural elements of the policy paper were introduced. Next, to clarify the issue more, a brief example of the basic sections of a policy paper, to solve one of the problems of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Kurdistan as a part of the KRG, was provided. The SWOT analysis method was then explained, which is one of the most common methods of designing the strategy matrix. In addition, in the section of the policy paper sample, three options were proposed to solve the practical problem of the KRG's Higher Education Ministry, by using the SWOT analysis method and making use of the matrix of quadruple strategies. Next, the implementation possibility, strengths, and negative consequences of the three suggested options were examined, with the three suggested options prioritized in the end.

Using a policy paper, which is a research aimed at solving practical problems, the decision-makers of other ministries and organizations in the KRG will be able to understand their practical problems better and implement appropriate strategies to solve them. From among other practical problems for which a policy paper could be written and suggested to various ministries, one can refer to the problems associated with electricity, water, agricultural industries especially the wheat industry, business orientation in line with strengthening domestic industries, creating the culture of environmental protection, cooperation among various parties' media in national issues and in the public interest, and creating the culture of urbanization.

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