



What Impact Do Career Centers Have on Students' Employability in Iraq?

INTRODUCTION

Career centers globally play an increasingly important role in assisting youth with the education to work transition, and in supporting students to pursue their professional interests, including internships and employment opportunities. In Iraq, IREX launched the first university career development centers (CDCs) in 2012, and has since expanded the model to every public university in the country in partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

University graduates in Iraq face a challenging economic environment, with an estimated 25% youth unemployment rate (ILOSTAT 2020), limited private sector opportunities, and difficult labor

market conditions that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing conflict. In Iraq and globally, scant evidence exists on the actual impact of career center services on preparing students for the workforce and on employment outcomes. This is why we wanted to know:

- **What impact do career centers have on students' employability in Iraq?**
- **How has COVID-19 impacted graduates' employment?**
- **What do Iraqi youth themselves recommend to improve career services?**

KEY FINDINGS

Findings suggest that CDCs in Iraq are likely having a positive impact on employment outcomes.

Compared to non-CDC participants, CDC participants are:

- **More likely to be employed**
- **More likely to be satisfied with their job**
- **Less likely to report that their employment has been negatively affected by COVID**
- **Less likely to rely on personal connections to obtain a job**

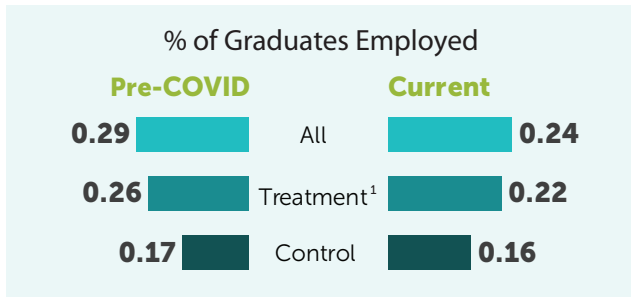
METHODOLOGY

IREX partnered with IDinsight to conduct a quasi-experimental impact evaluation of career centers in Iraq. Graduates from the 2018 and 2019 graduating classes from four public universities were sent a web-based survey (in English, Arabic, and Kurdish) with questions about their employment status, experience accessing CDC services, and recommendations for strengthening CDC services for future cohorts. 548 graduates responded to this survey. IDinsight matched graduates who used CDC services with graduates who did not use CDC services on observable characteristics and compared their outcomes. Data collection also included virtual focus group discussions with current students, CDC staff, and industry partners across Iraq.

IREX's work with Career Development Centers and this career services evaluation are part of the [U.S.-Iraq Higher Education Partnerships Program](#), sponsored by U.S. Embassy, Baghdad.

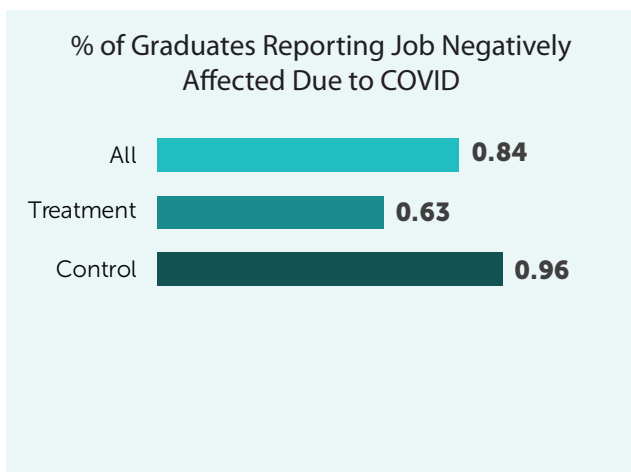
Key Findings Employability Outcomes

Employment Status and Job Satisfaction



- Graduates who participated in CDC activities were **53% more likely** (9 percentage points) than matched comparison graduates **to be employed** before the pandemic.
- On average, **CDC participants** report being slightly **more satisfied with their jobs** than matched non-CDC peers, though the difference is not statistically significant.
- **Internships** were among the **most beneficial CDC service** for graduates' employability.

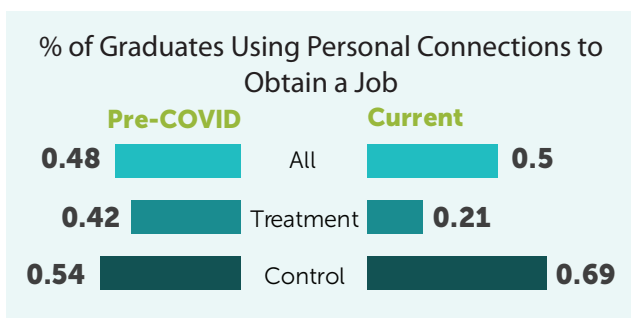
Effects of COVID-19 on Employment



The COVID-19 pandemic has **negatively impacted employment** for a majority of previously employed graduates.

- As of November 2020, 42% of previously-employed graduates are no longer working in the same job as they were in January 2020; half of those attribute their job loss to COVID-19.
- 84% of previously employed graduates report lower pay, fewer hours, a need to move for work or take unpaid leave due to the pandemic.
- While fewer CDC than non-CDC participants report being negatively affected, the sample size of employed graduates pre-COVID is not large enough to detect precise differences between these groups.

Method of Obtaining a Job



- Nearly half of employed grads acquired jobs through personal connections, rather than through university or CDC resources, or other methods.
- **CDC participants** were **less likely to get their jobs through personal connections** than non-CDC participants, particularly those CDC participants who remained employed through the pandemic.
- This suggests that CDC tools and networks may be substituting for more traditional networks of acquiring jobs.

Job Search Duration

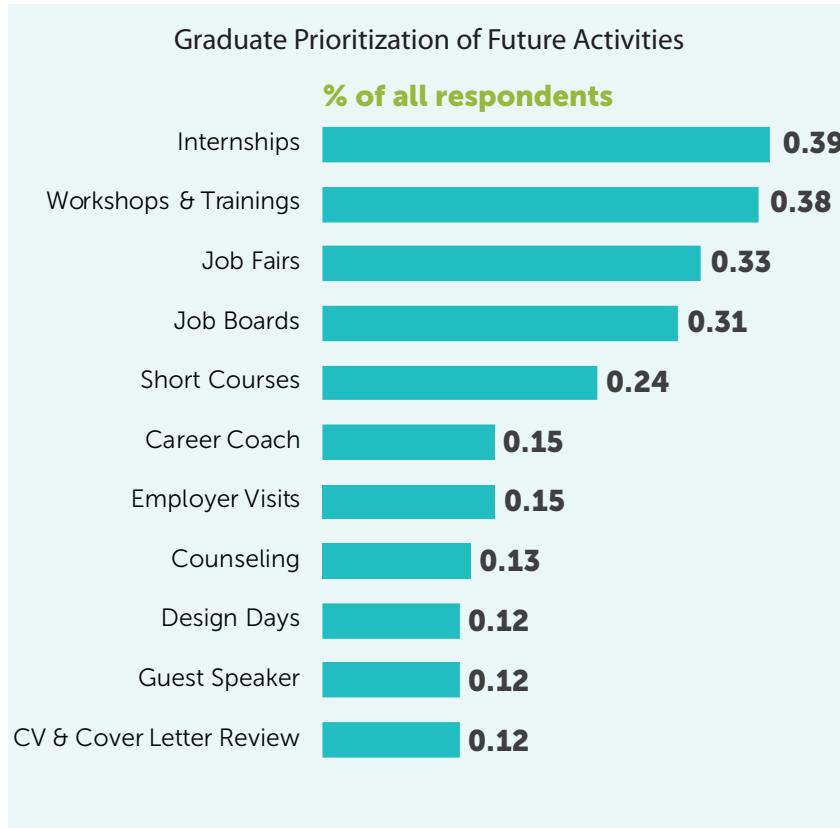
- Graduates report **long periods of unemployment** after graduation.²
- Among those graduates who eventually secure jobs, the average time that it takes to find a job after graduation is 5.6 months.

¹ Treatment group refers to graduates who participated in CDC activities and control group refers to graduates who did not participate in CDC activities. To construct comparison groups, IDinsight leveraged demographic characteristics collected in the survey form, including university, graduation year, gender, parental educational attainment, age, and major.

² The unemployment rate in this sample (71% pre-COVID) is much higher than the International Labor Organizations's 2020 estimate of unemployment among Iraqi youth (25% unemployment, ILOSTAT 2020).

Key Findings CDC Service Delivery

Survey data and focus group discussions offer insights into how CDCs could expand their services in the most effective ways to enhance their impact on student employability. Survey respondents were asked to select up to three existing activities that CDCs should prioritize offering in the future.



- **Internships** top the list, suggesting that students recognize the benefits of internships for securing employment, as shown in prior studies (e.g. O’Higgins and Pinedo, 2018; NYU, 2019; and NACE, 2017).
- **Workshops, job fairs, and job boards** are also rated as high priority activities. Based on focus group discussions, virtual micro-internships seem to be a particularly promising service to help graduates gain employment skills, particularly during the pandemic.

Employers noted that students who have completed internships know what types of questions to ask during a job interview. They already come into jobs with an understanding of office life and company culture.

Graduate Feedback on University Preparation for Employment

Survey respondents who reported pre-COVID employment were asked to rate how well their university prepared them in various employment skills on a scale of 1 (Not prepared at all) to 5 (Very prepared).

- While all skills have unmet demand, **critical thinking, English, verbal communications, and computer skills** top the list.
- In focus group discussions, industry partners cited email proficiency and communications as key skills for employees as well as Microsoft training, English communication, and taking initiative.

“

When I was a student, I had weekly-based activities with the CDC and was also a beneficiary of one of their grants. With the CDCs support, I implemented my project; as a result of this project, it opened my career path and allowed me to start working right after graduation.

- University graduate in Iraq

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CAREER CENTERS TO EXPAND AND IMPROVE CAREER SERVICES

Feedback from university graduates, current students, CDC staff, and industry partners identified several strengths and areas of improvement in CDC service delivery. While most CDC activities received high marks from participants and industry partners, many university graduates were unaware of the majority of CDC activities. Ideas for how to improve CDC participation and strengthen and expand the activities are offered below.



Support students' job search process

A large majority of graduates surveyed remain unemployed years after graduating (76%), and even more graduates are actively looking for a job (86%).

- **Prioritize job search preparation and strategy workshops**, and provide and maintain **job boards**. In addition, career centers can consider creating a database of students and/or alumni on the job market to share with industry partners, and encourage graduates to pursue employment in the private sector.



Improve awareness about CDC services

CDC services receive high marks from graduates in terms of relevance and usefulness, and respondents appreciate the wide range of CDC offerings. However, most students are unaware of most CDC services, and CDCs may be able to do more to advertise them. Recommendations include:

- **Identify the social media channels that students actively use**, and publicize CDC services on those channels.
- **Disseminate more student and alumni success stories** and emphasize their importance as part of marketing strategies.



Increase internships and provide more support with the internship experience

Employers in particular recognized the pivotal role of internships in preparing students for the workforce.

- **Encourage more student participation in internships** and micro-internships, and work with industry partners to **ensure a strong skills match for internship placements**.
- If internships are virtual, CDCs can also consider **building in a day of in-person interaction**.



Engage CDC partners in CDC service delivery and design

CDC partners, including private sector representatives and university alumni, can collaborate with universities to further strengthen the relevance and effectiveness of CDC activities.

- **Engage industry partners and alumni to lead more trainings, workshops, and short courses**, soliciting industry partner input on CDC workshops and trainings, and **soliciting student and alumni feedback** through regular surveys and feedback.



Expand and update workshops and short courses

Workshops are among the most well-known and highest-attended CDC activities. Feedback from graduates indicate ways to build on this success.

- **Provide short courses or workshops on high demand skills**, such as English, communications Microsoft office, Excel, and entrepreneurship, in addition to building critical thinking, collaboration, initiative, and negotiation skills.
- **Expand workshops to 1st and 2nd year students, increasing hands-on learning and role-play opportunities** during workshops
- **Provide certificates** for completing workshops and short courses, and **cooperate with other university departments** to ensure that CDC service periods are coordinated with other university programming.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR KEY STAKEHOLDERS

IDinsight and IREX provide additional recommendations for university leaders, the donor community, and Ministry officials. These recommendations are grounded in the results of the career services analysis, including data on effective university - industry engagement and career preparation programming, as well as a review of IREX programming and stakeholder engagement in Iraq.



UNIVERSITY LEADERS:

Support professional development for faculty and CDC staff

- **Facilitate introduction of new instructional strategies and student-centered learning models** supporting critical thinking, negotiation, communication and other skills highlighted through this evaluation.

Promote industry and university alumni engagement

- **Promote CDC as a university focal point for industry engagement and private sector recruitment needs.** When engaging with external partners, promote the CDC's capabilities to meet private sector internship and entry-level employment needs.
- **Support CDC staff to track alumni outcomes.** Coordinate first destination surveys through CDCs to track alumni employment outcomes and use data to inform programming.

Support CDC operations and infrastructure

- **Allocate resources to ensure dedicated staff.** Ensure that at a minimum, each CDC has dedicated staff who are able to provide core career services including workshops and trainings, internship programming, employer outreach and engagement, and alumni engagement.
- **Provide infrastructure and capacity building support.** Enhance CDC capacity by providing additional software and IT support, and CDC data management and reporting by supporting the development of a data management system and providing physical office space to enable the CDCs execute activities effectively and facilitate staff training.



DONOR COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT/MINISTRY PARTNERS:

Develop stronger private sector and university engagement to support economic development

- **Strengthen capacity of academic institutions** to support private sector through applied research and development, pipeline of qualified employees, and training opportunities.
- **Expand role of university career centers** aimed at assisting institutions and individuals to connect to private sector.
- **Create and participate in industry advisory boards or committees** for input into academic programs as a vital resource for adapting curriculum and programs to address current and forecasted industry needs.
- **Facilitate sector-specific focus groups** with industry leaders for more detailed and nuanced sector specific information, as well as recommendations for addressing changes in academic programs.
- **Support infrastructure for university adoption of Career Management Systems.** Provide customized software that acts as a comprehensive platform for university career centers to manage interaction with, provide services for, and track data with students, alumni, and employers.

Strengthen key skills for international business including English language and computer/ICT skills and digital literacy for the workplace

- **ICT/Computer skills and digital literacy training should be introduced** across all academic departments in universities, colleges, and TVET institutes.
- **Partnerships with employers** to co-develop or even co-implement trainings should be explored.
- **Continued support for strengthening English language skills** through education, higher education, and English language training for educators, MOHE strategy development for improving English for non-English majors, and development of high quality English language centers on all Iraqi university campuses.

Develop competencies of university graduates to meet labor market needs

- **Support initiatives that develop soft skills of university students such as experiential education programs.** Internships, apprenticeships and other practical hands-on initiatives provide a basis for students to develop skills and gain crucial real-world experience.
- **Support universities' flexibility and autonomy to offer certificates, short-term courses, design day or innovation challenges** that work to build the soft skills, technical skills, and entrepreneurial mindset among students and alumni.



IREX is a global development and education organization dedicated to building a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world by empowering youth, cultivating leaders, strengthening institutions, and extending access to quality education and information. IREX has worked for nearly a decade in Iraq to increase access to quality higher education and increase youth employability. IREX cultivates partnerships linking U.S. universities and community colleges to universities in the region, and fosters linkages with the private sector to increase students' workforce preparedness. Contacts regarding this evaluation: Dr. Lori Mason, Senior Technical Expert, lmason@irex.org and Stanley Currier, Senior Technical Advisor, scurrier@irex.org.

IDinsight uses data and evidence to help leaders combat poverty worldwide. Collaborations deploy a large analytical toolkit to help clients design better policies, rigorously test what works, and use evidence to implement effectively at scale. IDinsight places special emphasis on using the right tool for the right question, and tailors rigorous methods to the real-world constraints of decision-makers. IDinsight works with governments, foundations, NGOs, multilaterals and businesses across Africa and Asia in all major sectors, including health, education, agriculture, governance, financial access, and sanitation. Contact regarding this evaluation: Jeffery McManus, IDinsight Senior Economist, Jeffery.mcmanus@idinsight.org.

Please see the following link for the full career services evaluation:
<https://www.idinsight.org/reports-2/evaluation-of-career-development-centers-in-iraq>