

VISION FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Vision Foundation Research and Policy Series (VFRPS)

The Future of Vocational Training and Strengthening the Labor Market in the Kurdistan Region

POLICY RESEARCH PAPER

Publication Information

Publication Number

VFSS-PR-2026-003

Publication Type: Policy Research Paper

Series: Vision Foundation Research and Policy Series (VFRPS)

Language

English

Publication Date

August 2026

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Publication Identifiers

ISSN (Print): Not Yet Assigned

ISSN (Online): Not Yet Assigned

DOI: Not Yet Assigned

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Suggested Citation

Sara, (2026).

The Future of Vocational Training and Strengthening the Labor Market in the Kurdistan Region

Vision Foundation Research and Policy Series (VFRPS).

VFSS-PR-2026-003.

Vision Foundation for Strategic Studies (VFSS), Sulaymaniyah, Iraq.

DOI: Not Yet Assigned.

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Abstract

This policy research paper, titled "The Future of Vocational Training and Strengthening the Labor Market in the Kurdistan Region" analyzes the performance and efficacy of vocational training centers in the region. Using a qualitative research method, primary data was obtained via (Focus Group) interviews with key stakeholders. Qualitative data collected was analyzed using (Thematic Analysis) to examine the actual role of these vocational training centers, identify major operational and structural constraints and come up with practical policy recommendations.

It has been established that during (22) years of operations, these vocational training centers have had an actual role in building practical skills among young people and unemployed job seekers through various training programs. However, official statistics by the Labor Force Survey of the Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office shows that unemployment in the region was 16.5% in (2021). Contributing factors to these vocational centers include many structural problems, such as mismatch between training programs and labor market needs, lack of standardized programs, lack of certified instructors, restrictive administrative rules, weak tracking system after training, poor inter-organizational coordination, negative social attitudes towards vocational education, and lack of equal access to training programs. Without systematic reform, the private sector will continue to depend much on the migration of foreign labor, thus disempowering local youths of new economic opportunities.

From the analysis, it can be concluded that in the modern globalized world, vocational training is a crucial means of gaining technical expertise and achieving employment. It is clear then that reform of the vocational training system is needed in the Kurdistan Region. In this regard, the policy paper identifies a realistic path for policymakers that includes the revision of administrative policies, adoption of a common competency-based training and assessment curriculum, improving multi-stakeholder governance, and implementation of graduate tracking systems. Implementation of these strategic reforms will ensure minimum fiscal inefficiencies in training costs, increase private sector satisfaction with graduates, and greatly improve employment rates of graduates after training.

1. Introduction

Increasing levels of youth unemployment, lack of practical skills, and technological changes have made it evident that Vocational Education and Training is of utmost importance in terms of development and strengthening of human capacities in accordance with the changing labor market requirements. Vocational education and training refer to initial and continuing education programs provided by schools, training centers, or special institutions that help individuals to gain the necessary practical skills and competencies required to carry out or enter certain occupations and occupational groups within any branch of economic activity (ILO, 2022). Such initiatives are crucial in developing human capital and ensuring that individuals have the necessary skills, which would help them get better jobs and thus contribute to the overall economic growth through provision of skilled workers.

The Kurdistan Region in Iraq experiences an official youth unemployment rate of 16.5%. This implies that there is a structural mismatch between the skills that jobseekers have and the skills demanded by the labor market. The situation is further worsened by the involuntary and voluntary return of the migrants in addition to the presence of displaced populations. It is necessary to reform the vocational training system in order to enhance skills and improve the employment situation in the Kurdistan Region. However, although there is consensus regarding the strategic importance of vocational centers, their overall performance depends on their ability to respond to the labor market demands and adapt to socio-economic and technological changes. It is therefore important to identify the structural and functional barriers that prevent these vocational centers from achieving their goals.

The purpose of this research paper is to examine the current situation regarding vocational training in the Kurdistan Region. In order to fulfill this goal, this paper poses two major research questions: First, what are the structural and administrative barriers that limit the operational effectiveness of vocational training centers in the Kurdistan Region? Second, what policy interventions should the government undertake to align the vocational training system with the private sector and labor market requirements? This paper relies on qualitative data collected during Focus Group Discussions conducted among various stakeholders, such as vocational training centers, directorates of the public sector, academia, civil society organizations and international development agencies.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Approach and Data Sources

This policy analysis takes a qualitative approach to identify current structural problems and future directions of vocational education and training in the Kurdistan Region. The use of qualitative methodology facilitates the collection of data that isn't numerical but related to experience, perception, attitude, and motivation in the context of the institution (Oranga & Matere, 2023). This method is based on direct observations, field interviews, and focus groups' discussions to gain contextual insights.

The choice of this method is justified by its ability to provide a detailed analysis of stakeholder experiences, functioning dynamics of vocational training centers, and perspectives on labor market adaptation. To add empirical soundness and scientific validity, this study uses data triangulation based on several sources of primary and secondary data:

1. Guidelines and regulations developed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.
2. Statistics and analysis reports of the Kurdistan Region Statistics Office.
3. Operational data of Directorate General of Vocational Training with regard to the number of centers, programs, and gender-related graduates' statistics.
4. Primary data collected during focus groups' discussions.

2.2. Sampling and Participant Selection

The research adopted the approach of non-probability (Purposive Sampling) for recruiting 25 focus groups' participants. The purposive sampling approach was crucial for ensuring that the domain specialists, organizational leaders, and practitioners associated with vocational education and labor market development are incorporated into the survey. Profiles of participants along with institutional affiliation, designation, and sample sizes are available in Appendix (1).

2.3. Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

Primary data was collected using structured Focus Group Discussion technique. According to Oranga & Matere (2023), the Focus Group Discussion research technique is a strategy that involves bringing people of the same professional background together in order to stimulate interaction and deep understanding of complex organizational issues, with the researcher as a discussion facilitator who records field observations.

The discussion was conducted by the Vision Foundation on July 8, 2026, in the framework of the (Open Eye) initiative with the topic "The future of vocational training and labor market empowerment". The two-hour long discussion enabled

interdisciplinary interaction within different institutional frameworks, such as public institutions of education, educational establishments, vocational centers, civil society, and private sector. The discussion was conducted along the following thematic lines:

1. To what extent has vocational training centers satisfied labor market skills in the past?
2. What are the particular technical skills that the private sector requires, and what are the main barriers for vocational graduates to gain sustainable employment?
3. What are the policy tools that the government needs to use to innovate vocational centers and increase their efficiency?

All discussions were recorded with participants' consent, as well as observation field notes made by the research team.

2.4. Data Analysis Protocol and Saturation

Data analysis was done in line with a well-organized five-step thematic analysis protocol aimed at identifying, organizing, and integrating core analytical themes:

1. Transcription and Familiarization: Verbatim transcription of the audio recordings, followed by repeated readings to develop a good contextual understanding of the research material.
2. Initial Coding: Breaking down the transcribed text into meaningful functional codes that represent participant concepts.
3. Theme Identification: Grouping codes into themes according to the problems identified and policy recommendations given.
4. Verification and Validation: Matching the identified themes with the original transcript to check for context accuracy and consistency.
5. Refinement: Definition and naming of the primary themes as well as sub-themes.

Theoretical saturation was tested throughout the analysis. The saturation of concepts was attained about 90 minutes into the focus group discussion, as a result of the repeated core concepts with no new analytical codes or themes appearing.

2.5. Methodological Limitations

Although this research is very insightful from the point of view of empirical analysis for policy makers, the limitations of the methodology need to be noted while analyzing the results obtained. The limitation here is that the results obtained are based on the qualitative perceptions of a chosen few stake-holders in the institutions and hence, cannot be generalized statistically to all administrative regions of the Kurdistan Region.

3. The State of Vocational Training in the Kurdistan Region

Established in 2004 as a non-profit governmental organization under the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, the Directorate of Vocational Training has its main objectives in improving workforce capabilities, sustainable employment, and creating job opportunities. From the day of its establishment, the Directorate provided vocational training services for unemployed local youth, internally displaced people from central and southern Iraq, Syrian refugees, and returning migrants.

3.1. Institutional Evolution

From the day of its establishment, the Directorate of Vocational Training experienced great changes in structure due to changing socio-economic environment in the region. In order to assess the operation capability and institutional development of the Directorate, Table (1) below presents stages of its institutional development and the results thereof.

Table 1: Evolutionary Phases of the Directorate of Vocational Training

Timeframe	Key Developments and Organizational Growth
2004 – 2010	Initial establishment phase, operating with only two functional workshops (Computer Skills and Tailoring/Sewing).
2010 – 2012	Programmatic expansion in collaboration with the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), introducing administrative support and six additional workshops, bringing the total to eight functional workshops.
2013 – 2015	Organizational restructuring resulting in the functional separation of employment services from training operations, leaving the Sulaymaniyah Vocational Training Directorate focused strictly on training execution.
2016 – Present	Further physical expansion of training facilities, scaling up operations to (25) practical workshops.

In spite of the increase in the number of practical workshops from 2 to 25, qualitative findings obtained from the focus groups participants show that there was no improvement in the post-training job performance. The reason for the above results can be explained in terms of several structural problems:

First, the number of workshops has increased without paying attention to the empirical mapping of market demand and the needs of the private sector, thus there has been a

constant flow of graduates having knowledge and skills on traditional trades rather than on contemporary labor markets requiring knowledge on the modern technical skills.

Second, the growth in facilities didn't coincide with the increase in the number of qualified trainers as explained in details in the next section.

3.2. Service Provision and Program Expansion

The Directorate currently owns (25) practical training workshops covering various domains of technical training such as Information Technology/Computing, Tailoring, Knitting, Construction, Architectural Drafting, Plumbing and Water Systems, HVAC/Heating, Electrical Wiring, Solar Energy, Barbering, Cosmetology, Marketing, Automotive Repair, Mobile Phone Repair, CCTV Installation, Early Childhood Care, Event Management, Carpentry, Interior Decoration, and Confectionery/Pastry Making. In addition to the technical training of trainees, holistic professional development modules are included in each track of the program. These modules include life skills training, professional profiling, work ethics, occupational safety and health, and social security regulations to make the trainees aware of employees' rights and duties before joining the labor market.

From 2004 to June 2026, 304 vocational courses were held by the Directorate during which 4,641 people (1,758 males and 2,883 females) were trained.

Initially, the vocational training service was offered only in Sulaymaniyah City. In order to increase its regional coverage, through iterations in inter-institutional discussions, four more centers have been established and upgraded to complete operational directorates: The Garmiyan Vocational Training Directorate, Halabja Vocational Training Directorate, Raparin Vocational Training Directorate, and Chamchamal Vocational Training Center. As stated in Article 1 of Instruction No. 4 of 2013, the statutory mission of these centers is to provide the technical education and training to "technically educate and train citizens to attain proficiency in a specific trade or to upgrade their existing professional skill levels." Additionally, to solve the problem of the capacity shortage, the Directorate cooperates with specialized non-governmental and civil society centers including Workers' Awareness Center, SAVI, Handan, CIS, etc.

3.3. Admission Criteria, Operational Workflow, and Graduate Tracking

In order to meet requirements for admission, applicants should be unemployed (lacking any official position either in the public sector or being in receipt of salary), should fall within the age limit of 18 – 35 years (though in special cases it can be extended till age 38 years), and must reside in the territorial jurisdiction of particular training institution.

Training courses should last at least 45 days in order for candidates to acquire institutional certification.

Workflow of the student admission and training includes the following steps:

1. Registration: candidates register online or in person at the Directorate Student Affairs Unit.
2. Screening and selection: candidates undergo interviews in order to determine their aptitude and match their personal profiles with proper vocational tracks.
3. Core and supplemental instruction: enrolled trainees receive core technical training together with cross-cutting modules on life skills, occupational safety, professional ethics, CV writing, business strategy, and basic finances management.
4. Field Visits: candidates go to practical visit of sites of particular workshop specialization to observe in practice operations in industry.

As per the available tracking data of the Directorate, there is a field follow-up procedure in place for the compilation of contact information and profiling of 500 alumni that are now self-employed and working in the private sector. Evaluation committee conducts field visits and interviews with such persons in order to document their employment trajectories and estimate the functional value of training they have been through.

These 500 employed or self-employed alumni constitute about 10.8% (exactly 10.77%) of all 4,641 alumni trained since 2004. It shows that verified employment rate among alumni doesn't exceed 11%. It is a very modest indicator which demonstrates a clear need for fundamental systemic transformation. At the same time, there is no follow-up procedure with respect to other 89% of alumni in order to determine their employment, which results from absence of unified and continuous digital tracking system.

4. Key Structural and Operational Challenges

Theme analysis of the focus group discussion showed a number of structural and operational problems that limit the effectiveness of the vocational training centers in the Kurdistan Region. Such bottlenecks go beyond the internal institutional constraints and are reflective of the broader structural problems that pertain to labor market integration, educational policy, socio-cultural perceptions and regional development. These bottlenecks can be classified into 8 main themes as follows:

4.1. Mismatch Between Vocational Offerings and Labor Market Demands

The most basic issue that was raised by the participants is the disconnection of the vocational center offerings from labor market demands. It is essential to maintain constant connection with the needs of the market in order to teach people adaptable and lifelong technical skills (OECD, 2021). However, the participants argued that

although vocational training programs are meant to generate employment, the course offerings and the allocation of capacity are being decided through lack of structured labor market needs assessments. The result of this problem is that training centers continue to train people in oversaturated fields with poor employment opportunities.

As stated by Mr. Bab Rasul, director of the migration and crisis response department: "We must launch innovative courses rather than repeat traditional training courses such as tailoring and cosmetology, training should be oriented to current labor market needs"

Participants argued that the demand of the labor market should be used as the criteria for deciding what courses are being offered in vocational centers. For that, constant labor market intelligence, increased involvement of employers and empirical research are needed to update the curriculum. In case vocational training centers operate independent of the private sector demand, structural disconnection of skills leads to the problem of graduate unemployment. At the same time, there is constant shortage of local skilled workers, which makes employers import foreign labor.

At this point, there is no functional Labor Market Information System and no Skills Observatory. There are no data mechanisms that will help to foresee the demands of skills in (3-5 year) horizon. As a result, course approval depends either on legacy courses or institutional capacity rather than on empirical evidence. Vocational training centers use public money for teaching people about low value skills. Vocational training should prepare people not only for the current job openings but also for emerging fields that include digitalization, artificial intelligence and new technical skills.

4.2. Absence of Standardized National Curricula

There is no doubt that standardized curriculums are of great importance since they ensure that trainees of all regional centers get equal competency regardless of their geographical location. Standardized curriculums increase the credential value of vocational certificates and make employers trust graduate qualifications. Today, the deficiency of standardized instructional frameworks of all vocational centers is a problem that negatively affects learning outcomes and makes verification of competency levels across various centers impossible and increases employer's distrust of issued credentials.

As focus group members pointed out, this deficiency becomes one of the bottlenecks in work process. Absence of standardized frameworks forces individual trainers to develop their course materials and modules. As a vocational trainer remarked: "Individual curriculums design might be beneficial for the instructor himself/herself but harmful for the institution as a whole as it doesn't allow establishing a standardized regional curriculum". Thus, results of the training become inconsistent.

4.3. Severe Shortage of Specialized Trainers

The effectiveness of the training process depends on the competence of the instructional staff in technical and pedagogical aspects. Lack of qualified trainers is a problem that considerably limits center's operation. As a vocational trainer said: "We have a serious lack of technical personnel in our center, we have (25) workshops but only (11) instructors".

As participants emphasized, the problem becomes one more reason of poor instruction quality and individualized practical training as well. It also restricts centers from introducing modern technical specializations due to the rapid changes in the market. Taking into account the rapid technological development, there is a necessity not only to attract additional instructional staff to centers but to find specialists who will be able to work in technical specializations that are poorly represented in the country.

Overall, trainers have some operational limitations like insufficient staffing, absence of continual professional development and lack of experience in private sector industrial practices. Being forced to work within public administration framework makes instructors feel burnout, restricts the number of daily trainee supervisions and makes instructional content obsolete.

4.4. Administrative Constraints and Rigid Regulations

While administrative regulations seek to develop standardized operational procedures, strict guidelines that run contrary to prevailing economic conditions cause operational inconveniences. Participants indicated that although the Directorate intends to change young people's perception regarding dependence on employment in the public sector, sustaining skill acquisition within the mandatory 45-day course period required by administrative regulations is impractical.

This limitation was pointed out by the Director of Halabja Vocational Training Directorate, who commented: "Strict administrative guidelines limit our operational flexibility because imposing the same 45-day duration to all courses ignores the reality that not all technical trades have similar time requirements."

Not all technical vocations need the same amount of theory and practical work. Some of the fundamental trades can be learned in intensive courses, but advanced technical trades require several months of constant practical work to reach professional level. It imposes restrictions on instruction and flexibility of centers.

Contradictory regulatory systems were another problem cited by participants. For instance, while administrative regulations prohibit the use of foreign migrant workers in some sectors, there are certain technical trades for which there is no adequate local

trainer. Additionally, strict eligibility criteria create barriers to access vulnerable groups. The age criteria limit the potential pool of candidates for learning; as stated by Ms. Tara from the Asuda Organization, "divorced women over thirty years with little formal education are in dire need of vocational training and financial independence, yet age constraints render them ineligible." This is consistent with the limitations set forth by Regulation No. 2 of 2011 concerning Youth Small Business Support Fund, which confines micro-loans to applicants between ages 16 and 35.

4.5. Weak Graduate Tracking and Impact Evaluation

The inability of training providers to systematically track individuals' progress in employment is another critical bottleneck within the structure of vocational education and training institutions. Completing vocational courses doesn't guarantee employment or entrepreneurship.

Therefore, vocational centers need to go beyond merely offering training courses and establish efficient ways to evaluate how well skills gained correspond to market demand. The effectiveness of any program should be evaluated according to successful labor market integration and employment of the graduates using those skills (Cedefop, 2019). Many graduates continue to face entry barriers into the labor market after training, and some of them simply don't have resources and institutional support for starting an independent business. As a result, most trainees aren't able to use their skills in practice. Participants noted that the total lack of digital mechanisms for tracking makes long-term impact evaluation very problematic. Institutional success should be evaluated not by the number of trainees but by the employment rate, entrepreneurial success, and income stability of the graduates.

4.6. Fragmented Multi-Stakeholder Coordination

It is impossible to achieve strategic goals of vocational training solely with the help of isolated efforts on the part of government bodies. Improving labor market absorption needs coordinated action of governmental bodies, private businesses, and civil society organizations. Multi-stakeholder coordination is crucial for identifying skill gaps, designing corresponding curricula, creating more opportunities for work-based learning and job placement.

Participants identified the poor coordination between institutions as one of the main structural problems. Poor coordination results in redundancy in the offered courses, inefficiency in resource allocation, lack of work-based learning options at private companies and lack of micro-finance support for aspiring entrepreneurs among the graduates.

4.7. Socio-Cultural Stigma Surrounding Vocational Education

Negative socio-cultural perceptions have been associated with vocational education since it is perceived as an alternative for academically less successful students.

In discussing such perceptions, Dr. Ako from the Directorate of Vocational Education (Ministry of Education) remarked: "The vocational education has been stigmatized as something for underperforming students and we failed to positively transform such perception in a proactive way." The director of Halabja Vocational Training Directorate stressed: "Sending underperforming students to vocational high schools has created a negative social perception."

Participants emphasized the role of cultural stigma where university education is more appreciated than vocational training due to the perception associated with the status in the society and higher income expectations. People associate university degrees with the only possible way to get the government job and be socially valued. In contrast, vocational certificates imply poor pay and uncertain career opportunities. Literature supports the idea that vocational education is always subject to negative public perceptions that prevent potential students' participation (Aldossari, 2020).

4.8. Geographic Access Barriers

Proximity becomes a physical barrier that prevents equal training delivery among all regions. Lack of vocational training centers in numerous sub-districts along with their geographic isolation makes commuting costs too high for vulnerable groups. Participants pointed out that geographic clustering of training centers in large urban areas denies rural communities the opportunity to receive technical skills training.

5. Policy Recommendations for Institutional Modernization and Labor Market Strengthening

Based on the identified structure and process barriers within this study, the following policy recommendations can be drawn to help rejuvenate the system of vocational training and increase its contributions to labor market development in the Kurdistan Region.

5.1. Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration and Integrated Governance

It is recommended that the Directorate and vocational training centers within the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs move towards collaborative governance and integrated strategic planning by various government ministries, private sector companies, civil societies, and development agencies through the following measures:

1. Strategic Memoranda of Understanding: Developing formal Memoranda of Understanding between key institutions in order to institutionalize communication on labor market dynamics, systematic identification of skill gaps, and regular evaluations of vocational curriculums.
2. Direct Private Sector Involvement: Exploiting the private employers' understanding of the workplace demands and new occupational qualifications in the development of curriculums, work-based learning, apprenticeships, and skill evaluation. This approach will ensure that the skills offered in vocational training centers are relevant and usable in practice.
3. Academic Resources: Collaborating with universities and research institutions of academia to carry out quantitative labor market researches, update curriculums, train trainers, and develop teaching methods. It would be important to encourage higher educational institutions to provide specialized laboratories and workshops and academic teaching personnel in order to raise the technical value of the vocational qualification and its reputation in public. At the same time, curriculums of universities need to be practically aligned.

Table 2: Implementation Framework for Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Action Item	Supervisory Body	Strategic Partners	Timeframe	Estimated Cost
Execution of Strategic MoUs	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs	KRG Line Ministries, Chambers of Commerce & Industry, Board of Investment, Small Business Loan Directorate, NGOs	Short-term (6–12 months)	Low Cost
Joint Research, Facility Sharing, and Academic Faculty Exchange	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs	Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research	Medium-term (1–2 years)	Low Cost

5.2. Aligning Training Programs with Labor Market Demands

An initial requirement for making vocational training operations more efficient is ensuring that training courses are aligned with the economic needs of society. This requires that the training centers be flexible and ready to adjust to the needs of the private sector in terms of skills. To make this happen, institutional cooperation between training centers, private sector employers, businesses and universities is necessary in order to determine what sectors have more demands and define the competences needed in new occupations. Through continuous feedback, training centers will always be ready to introduce updated specializations which will be influenced by technological advancements and artificial intelligence.

Making the connection between the supply of training and labor market requirements means focusing on some high-priority sectors. These sectors include:

1. Renewable Energy and Utilities: Training related to installation, maintenance and use of solar photovoltaic systems and advanced water heating systems.
2. Digital Services and Marketing: Information technology networking, computer system administration and digital marketing.
3. Modern Automotive and Industrial Maintenance: Modern automotive maintenance of hybrid and electric cars, maintenance of modern industrial machines and biomedical equipment.
4. Modern Construction and Environmental Control: Use of advanced building materials, HVAC systems (centralized heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning).

Table 3: Implementation Framework for Aligning Training Programs

Action Item	Supervisory Body	Strategic Partners	Timeframe	Estimated Cost
Phase-out of saturated/obsolete courses and launching high-demand technical specializations	Directorate General of Vocational Training	Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, NGOs, Private Sector Enterprises, Trade Unions	Medium-term (1–2 years)	Medium to High Cost

5.3. Establishing a Unified Competency-Based Curriculum Framework

The creation of a standardized national curriculum framework is crucial to structural reform. The standardized instructional framework specifies learning objectives,

theoretical and practical competencies required, evaluation criteria, and minimal competencies for every vocational discipline. Geographical standardization removes structural inequalities between regions ensuring that trainees develop standard competencies irrespective of the training center. Additionally, the standardization of instructional benchmarks enhances the credibility of vocational certifications among employers.

These six structural elements should be embedded into the vocational education curriculum for this system to work effectively:

1. Occupational Standards: Skill and knowledge benchmarks required for certain trades by private employers and industrial bodies.
2. Curriculum Design: Formalized content and methodology developed by relevant educational institutions that meet the occupational standards.
3. Trainer Qualification Standards: Required academic qualifications and mandatory Continuing Professional Development / ToT programs to make sure that trainers are ready to teach modernized curriculum.
4. Practical Assessment: Evaluation protocols replacing conventional paper-based tests. As vocational education deals with trades, the criteria for certification should be practical demonstration of technical competencies not literacy test.
5. Competency-Based Certification: Official certification for demonstrated competencies in the trades provided by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.
6. Employer Recognition: Institutional cooperation with private sector organizations to get their recognition of these certifications.

Table 4: Implementation Framework for Curriculum Standardization

Action Item	Supervisory Body	Strategic Partners	Timeframe	Estimated Cost
Curriculum standardization based on competency benchmarks and formulation of a Vocational Qualifications Framework	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs	Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Private Employers	Long-term (2–4 years)	Medium Cost

5.4. Contracting Private Sector Trainers and Institutionalizing Continuous Professional Development

To address the challenges posed by persistent instructional inadequacies and the need to fill emerging technical skill gaps, vocational training centers cannot depend only on the services of permanent public sector cadre members. An appropriate regulatory system must be put in place to engage the services of specialists from the private sector. This way, people with advanced academic qualifications or those who have many years of practical experience in industry can pass on modern technical knowledge to trainees. Funding for contractor pay can be made using cost sharing arrangements with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and international development agencies. The engagements of the contractors should be short term and be paid for on an hourly or module-by-module basis. This will help avoid the burden of paying permanent salaries.

The requirements for qualification of applicants should be strictly adhered to:

1. **Academic/Technical Qualification:** Applicants with a certificate from a technical institute or a university degree or above should have a minimum of three years of practical experience in their respective areas of specialization.
2. **Master Craftsperson Qualifications:** Artisans and master technicians without academic qualifications should have a minimum of five years of practical experience in their area of specialization and pass a tough practical test.

All recruited trainers will need to attend mandatory ToT courses before assuming their teaching duties. In addition, there will be a need for mandatory continuous professional development for instructional staff. With rapid technology advancement and increasing use of artificial intelligence in industries, trainers will have to undergo annual refresher courses to update technical knowledge and instructional techniques. Evaluation of post-instruction performance can be done systematically through trainee feedback and field evaluation by institutional evaluation teams.

Table 5: Implementation Framework for Trainer Contracting and Capacity Building

Action Item	Supervisory Body	Strategic Partners	Timeframe	Estimated Cost
Contracting private sector specialist trainers and institutionalizing ToT pedagogy programs	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs	Ministry of Finance, International Organizations, Engineers Union	Short to Medium-term (6 months – 2 years)	Medium Cost

5.5. Administrative Reform and Regulatory Flexibility

Regulations have to promote innovation by giving centers complete freedom to change duration of courses, entry requirements, and course delivery according to trade requirements peculiar to the industry. Changes in regulations are possible since administrative regulations are within the purview of the ministry and don't require statutory changes. Changes in regulations will ensure that vocational centers can respond dynamically to labor market changes.

Changes to be introduced in regulatory guidelines include:

1. Flexibility in Duration of Courses: Modification of the regulation which requires that all vocational courses be of one month's duration. The duration of courses needs to be flexible depending on the technical complexity of the trade and not on a set time limit.
2. Modification of Upper Age Limit: Broadening of the age limit of potential clients from the current 18-35 years to include other job seekers such as divorced women and returning migrants.
- 3.

Table 6: Implementation Framework for Administrative Modernization

Action Item	Supervisory Body	Strategic Partners	Timeframe	Estimated Cost
Amending administrative directives governing student age thresholds and standardized course durations	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs	Ministry Legal Affairs Committee	Short-term (3–6 months)	Low Cost

5.6. Graduate Tracking Mechanisms, Career Guidance, and Micro-Finance Integration

Smooth labor market transition of graduates should be a key institution goal of the vocational training centers. Graduate tracking mechanism needs to be set up to trace the employment routes after course completion. Tracking system will measure whether training courses are meeting their intended goals and will determine what structural factors contribute to the employment of graduates. Support services offered by training institutions should include career counseling, self-employment services, and job placement within the private sector companies.

The solution to the current problems of tracking is to create an organized database managed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs in coordination with training directorates on the regional level. The database needs to work in accordance with the following tracking timeline:

1. Graduation Intake Baseline: Gathering baseline data about graduates such as practical competency levels, job aspirations, and socio-economic background.
2. Milestone at Three Months: Measuring job search activity and velocity, and microenterprise establishment attempts.
3. Milestone at Six Months: Measuring placement rate and wage level of graduates and the match between acquired skills and job requirements.
4. Milestone at Twelve Months: Measuring employment retention rate, income growth trends, and career path.

Finally, employers need to be surveyed every quarter about their opinions on workplace performance, technical proficiency and professional ethics of graduates in private sector companies.

Beside job placement services, the training centers have to offer enterprise development services as well. Although most of graduates know how to use their trade skills, they may lack necessary capital and business management knowledge. Therefore, vocational programs have to work with partner organizations and provide support with developing business plans, advise on microenterprise management, and provide access to microloans. With formal relationships established with financial institutions both public and commercial, loan qualification needs to depend on the course completion, submission of business plan and certification of competency credentials. Finally, mentoring of businesses for the first six months after establishment will increase chances of success and loan repayment.

Table 7: Implementation Framework for Graduate Tracking and Micro-Finance Integration

Action Item	Supervisory Body	Strategic Partners	Timeframe	Estimated Cost
Implementing a digital graduate tracking platform and facilitating micro-loan access for qualified entrepreneurs	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs	Ministry of Finance, Public and Private Commercial Banks, Technology Enterprise Partners	Medium-term (1–2 years)	Medium Cost

5.7. Mitigating Socio-Cultural Stigma and Raising Public Awareness

A paradigm shifts in the way people view vocational training especially technical secondary education is fundamental for the implementation of reforms in the system. There should be a concerted effort by government agencies, educational institutions, media, and the private sector to create awareness of the existence of vocational education as well as its graduates' success stories. Additionally, there should be efforts by educational institutions to channel students into vocational routes according to their aptitudes and market opportunities, not cultural biases. This can be done through the development of career guidance sections in educational institutions in basic levels of education (up to 9th grade).

In tandem with these outreach programs, credentials from vocational courses have to be incorporated in a National Qualifications Framework. Formal articulation routes will ensure that vocational certifications have the same status as academic qualifications, thus retaining continuous access to higher education.

Table 8: Implementation Framework for Public Awareness and Stigma Mitigation

Action Item	Supervisory Body	Strategic Partners	Timeframe	Estimated Cost
Executing media campaigns, highlighting graduate success stories, activating school career counseling, and establishing academic-vocational credential equivalence	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs & Ministry of Education	Ministry of Culture and Youth, Media Outlets	Continuous	Low to Medium Cost

5.8. Harnessing Artificial Intelligence as an Instructional Enabler

Modification of vocational education curriculum due to technological development and the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) technology shouldn't be seen as a problem that disrupts educational processes but rather as an opportunity to modernize teaching methods and boost the competitiveness of the trained labor. In this research, we propose to embed practical AI modules into regular vocational curriculum. The modules include learning about digital communication in professional context, basics of cybersecurity, digital data management, and application of generative AI technology for content creation, product copy and social media management in small businesses.

Table 9: Implementation Framework for AI and Digital Skills Integration

Action Item	Supervisory Body	Strategic Partners	Timeframe	Estimated Cost
Integrating digital literacy and practical AI applications across all vocational training tracks	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs & Ministry of Education	Department of Information Technology, Technology Enterprises, Universities	Medium-term (1–2 years)	Low Cost

5.9. Overcoming Geographic Access Barriers

Vocational training institutions should consciously seek to reach out beyond big cities. Expansion plans should be based on economic demand analysis and careful cost-benefit analysis to avoid financial inefficiency in setting up new facilities or mobile training units. Before embarking on course provision in areas other than the provincial capitals, the following three criteria need to be considered: population density, unemployment rate among the youth, and the economic activity in the area (agriculture, industries, or tourism).

Since it is financially not feasible to set up new permanent infrastructure in every sub-district, this research proposes three cost-effective models rather than establishing new institutes:

Table 10: Cost-Effective Delivery Models for Rural Access

Delivery Model	Operational Framework
Mobile Training Units	Deploying specialized instructional teams equipped with portable technical equipment to deliver short-term, intensive training modules (2 to 4 weeks) in remote areas.
Blended Learning Model	Delivering theoretical coursework via online digital platforms, combined with weekend practical sessions at centralized training facilities. This model minimizes travel costs, requiring physical attendance only for practical applications and examinations.
Subsidized Transportation Support	Providing dedicated shuttle transport or direct travel stipends for trainees residing in remote districts, ensuring geographic distance doesn't preclude vulnerable populations from acquiring skills.

6. Implementation Logic and Phased Action Plan

In order to implement the above strategy recommendations into actual operational practices within the Kurdistan Region, the following implementation plan is organized into a three-stage logical sequence:

Stage I: Immediate Institutional Framework (0-12 Months)

Strategic Partnership Agreements: Signing of bilateral and multi-lateral Memorandum of Understandings with private enterprise networks, Chambers of Commerce, international development agencies, and micro-finance institutions for ease of implementation of work-based learning, apprenticeships, and provision of startup capital.

Pilot Contracting Mechanism: Introduction of the specialist contracting mechanism for trainers within the private sector on a pilot project basis in the three major governorates (Erbil, Sulaimaniya, and Duhok) addressing immediate instructional gap in high demand areas.

Stage II: Integration and Curriculum Reforms (1-3 Years)

Centralized Tracking System: Operationalizing the central Digital Graduate Tracking System within the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and undertaking systematic baseline tracking of all graduates of new cohorts.

Curriculum Reforms: Transition of legacy vocational training programs to standardized competency-based instructional modules with integration of digital skills and practical application of artificial intelligence technologies within the training tracks.

Training Capacity Building: Mandating training of trainers pedagogy sessions, conducting industrial exposure tours for the instructional staff members, and building a continuing education framework.

Stage III: National Articulation and Universal Access (3-5 Years)

Articulation of Credentials: Articulation of credentials between vocational and academic qualifications in coordination with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in order to systematically eradicate the social cultural stigmatization of vocational programs.

Rural Expansion: Deployment of mobile training units and utilization of blended learning model to provide technical training to remote rural sub-districts within the region.

Conclusion

The policy paper highlights through thematic analysis of multi-stakeholder focus group discussions the fact that vocational training centers in the Kurdistan Region are experiencing structural and operational bottlenecks that need to be addressed. It is important to note that these problems cannot simply be attributed to internal managerial inefficiencies but to the fundamental problem of mismatch between training offered and labor demands of private sectors, absence of standard curricula, critical shortages of specialized instructors, contradictory administrative regulations, and the negative sociocultural perception of vocational education.

To overcome these bottlenecks, this research recommends an integrated reform package that can be implemented under the supervision of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs as the leading governing body, which will work in close collaboration with the Ministry of Planning, the Board of Investment, private sectors, and chambers of commerce. The proposed reform will shift the regional paradigm from fragmented and ineffective short courses into a comprehensive competency-based training program involving the use of AI and the private sector-based instructor contracts model.

Failure to make these changes and sticking to the current policies will continue the misallocation of the public money towards inefficient and non-productive training courses that don't provide individuals with any technical skills. This situation will lead to continued high levels of unemployment among youth and graduates, exacerbating social frustration, economic disengagement, and youth migration. In turn, local

businesses and foreign investors will continue to rely on imported migrant workers to cover labor shortages and will continue the flow of money out of the region.

In contrast, the gradual implementation of these policy recommendations provides an effective strategy for ensuring sustainable economic development. In the short-term (by 2027) the digital graduate tracking system and the trainer contracting model will help to increase graduate placements and create formal institutional channels for providing microfinance capital. In the long-term (by 2030) the universalization of the vocational qualifications framework and expansion of geographic coverage will improve employer satisfaction, make vocational education the major pillar of the domestic labor force supply, and decrease dependence on foreign labor.

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Appendix 1

Focus Group Participant Breakdown

Number of Participants	Representing Institution / Organization	Official Job Title / Position
Five	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs / Vocational Training Directorates	Director General, Center Director, Vocational Trainer
Eight	University Career Development Centers (CDCs) & Educational Institutions	CDC Director, University Professor, Educational Supervisor
Three	Directorate of Migration and Crisis Coordination, Directorate of Small Loans, Directorate of Social Security	Directors and Administrative Officers
Three	Civil Society Organizations & Non- Governmental Organizations	Project Managers
Two	Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Workers' Union	Institutional Representatives
Four	Private Sector Enterprises & Vocational Training Alumni	Human Resources Directors, Factory/Company Owners, Vocational Graduate (Small Business Owner)

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no financial, professional, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the preparation or conclusions of this publication.

Funding Statement

This publication did not receive external commercial funding unless otherwise stated.

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