

# 2025 BASRAH Conference



## Education Day Session 1: Schools

## Key Insights & Takeaways



+442072227100



Iraq Britain Business Council,  
Office 333, China Works, Black Prince  
Road, Vauxhall, London SE1 7SJ

# Introduction

The IBBC Autumn Conference in Basra convened senior government leaders, international education organisations, private operators and development partners to examine how Iraq's school sector can evolve to better support national renewal and labour-market needs. As part of the Education Day programme, the first session focused on schools and the reforms, partnerships and pathways required to strengthen learning outcomes and expand opportunities for millions of students.

The session was chaired by **Professor Mohammed Al-Uzri (IBBC)** and featured the following panellists:

- **Mr. Mahdi Saleh – Deputy Minister for Education**
- **Raed Mahmoud – SABIS**
- **Dr. Abdullah Kurudirek – Stirling Education**
- **Joanne Ball – Cambridge Education**
- **Mr. Ammar Tariq – British Council**

The discussion revolved around the following themes: rebuilding the education system to drive long-term human development, supported by early-years improvement and infrastructure renewal; aligning laws, institutions and university pathways with labour-market needs through clearer regulatory and employer-engagement structures; expanding high-quality routes into higher education through private and international schools with recognised external examinations; and strengthening foundational elements such as teacher quality, inclusion and early childhood development to ensure sustainable system-wide progress.

**Key takeaways for each stakeholder group involved in driving Iraq's educational transformation:**

- **Ministry of Education & Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research**  
A clearer picture of system-wide reform priorities, enabling alignment of legislation, early-childhood expansion, teacher development and inclusive education across the national strategy.
- **Basra and Iraqi Public Universities and Technical Institutions**  
Insights into how new legal frameworks, advisory councils and graduate-tracking mechanisms can strengthen links between academic preparation and labour-market requirements.
- **Private and International School Operators in Iraq and Kurdistan**  
Clarification of updated exam-recognition rules and university-entry pathways that support planning for curriculum design, investment and quality assurance.
- **Foreign and International University Providers and Investors in Iraq**  
An overview of how direct-admission mechanisms and recognised qualifications position international universities within Iraq's evolving higher-education system.
- **Basra-Based and Iraqi Industrial / Private-Sector Employers**  
A forward view of how universities and schools are creating structures—such as industrial advisory councils—to align graduate skills with sector needs.
- **International Education and Development Partners (e.g., British Council, UNICEF, IBBC)**  
A consolidated understanding of national strategies and system priorities that can guide targeted technical support, early-years initiatives and large-scale capability programmes.

Together, these perspectives outline a holistic view of how schools, regulators, universities, employers and partners can work in step to deliver an education system that supports Iraq's long-term social and economic development.

# 1. Rebuilding Education as a Driver of Human Development & National Renewal

Iraq's modernisation ambitions place education at the centre of long-term national renewal, and the country's recent history has created a deep need for structural reconstruction. Years of instability, isolation from global advances and pressure from rapid population growth have left schools struggling to meet demand. Many children continue to learn in overcrowded environments, with multi-shift schools, temporary caravan structures and ageing facilities forming a large share of the national stock. The scale of need is vast: millions of learners require improved access, stronger foundations and pathways that support their future economic participation. This reality sets the backdrop for a decade-long effort to rebuild an education system capable of supporting sustainable human development.

## Restoring System Capacity and Infrastructure

Policymakers have launched a long-term strategy to expand school infrastructure and increase capacity across all levels of general education. The challenge is not limited to constructing more schools but building institutions that support modern teaching, early learning and inclusive approaches. The shift toward a 10-year strategic framework reflects recognition that short-cycle interventions cannot overcome entrenched structural deficits. A core objective is to reduce overcrowding and replace thousands of inadequate facilities, particularly those operating multiple shifts. This infrastructure renewal is positioned as foundational to improving learning conditions and preparing young learners for the competencies required by the country's evolving economic landscape.

## Strengthening Foundational Learning and Early Childhood Development

Rebuilding begins at the earliest stages of a child's educational journey. The conversation emphasises how foundational literacy, numeracy and emotional development are central to long-term educational success. Programmes focused on early childhood and the first years of schooling aim to equip teachers and children with the skills to build strong cognitive and social bases. Millions of children are targeted by these initiatives, supported through structured partnerships that enhance classroom practice and help teachers adopt approaches centred on effective early learning. By investing in early years, the system seeks to ensure that later interventions—whether in secondary pathways or higher education—are built on stable ground.

## Embedding Long-Term Vision and System Alignment

The renewal of the education system is anchored in a comprehensive, future-oriented national vision. The 10-year strategy provides a framework through which ministries, development partners and private

operators can align priorities and resources. It seeks to modernise curricula, strengthen governance and integrate new methodologies that reflect global standards. The approach moves beyond short-term fixes, aiming instead to rebuild system coherence after decades of fragmentation. This long-range view is presented as essential for ensuring that millions of students—current and future—benefit from a system that is both resilient and responsive to national development goals.

## 2. Aligning Systems, Laws and Institutions with Labour-Market Needs

Efforts to modernise Iraq's education landscape increasingly focus on creating structural links between schools, universities and the labour market. Legislative and institutional reforms are being used to reorient higher education and technical institutions toward the country's economic priorities, particularly in Basra, where industry and manufacturing form a major share of regional activity. The updated higher-education legal framework provides universities with greater flexibility to respond to economic needs, establish commercially oriented structures and work directly with local employers. This shift marks a transition from a traditionally academic model to one designed to generate employable skills, stimulate innovation and support a more diversified economy.

### Modernising Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

Amendments to the Higher Education Law enable universities to operate with new institutional tools that were previously unavailable or restricted. These changes permit the creation of specialised science and technology units, allow for investment activity within universities and open pathways for research and applied knowledge to contribute to economic development. By embedding these capabilities in law, the system is positioned to function more dynamically and align academic output with workforce requirements. The evolution of acceptance and admission mechanisms—particularly those governing graduates of international programmes—further reinforces system coherence, reducing barriers between school pathways and higher education.

### Building University Structures that Engage Industry

A key institutional development is the establishment of industrial advisory councils and units dedicated to graduate follow-up and labour-market coordination. These mechanisms give universities a structured platform to communicate with employers, understand skills gaps and adapt programmes accordingly. In Basra, where industry forms a dominant part of the economy, these councils serve as a bridge between academic preparation and sector needs. Technical universities and colleges are also expanding applied departments to increase the job-readiness of graduates and encourage practical engagement with manufacturing and service industries. These structures support the goal of creating a workforce capable of contributing to a knowledge-based and innovation-driven economy.

### Translating Academic Output into Economic Value

The broader intention behind these reforms is to move education from a purely credential-driven system toward one that produces tangible economic outcomes. New science and technology departments encourage research translation, entrepreneurship and collaboration with the private sector. Graduate-tracking units help institutions monitor employment patterns and adjust offerings, while advisory

councils provide employers with an active role in shaping programmes. Together, these reforms aim to reduce the mismatch between graduate skills and labour-market needs—a key factor contributing to youth unemployment. By integrating legal reform, institutional design and employer engagement, the education system becomes a catalyst for workforce development and economic renewal.

### 3. Opening High-Quality Pathways through Private and International Schooling

Private and international schools are emerging as a significant pillar of Iraq’s education landscape, particularly in Basra, Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region. One long-established operator, SABIS, has been in education globally for 140 years and has worked in Iraq for around 20 years, beginning with schools in the Kurdistan Region before expanding to Baghdad and Basra. Across Iraq, this network now serves about 10,000 students and has produced roughly 1,600 graduates who have progressed to universities in Iraq, the UK, the US and other countries, illustrating the international reach of its pathways. Another group, Sterling schools, marked its 30th anniversary in 2023, having operated since 1994 and currently educating around 11,000 students across locations including Kirkuk, Basra and Baghdad, alongside an affiliated international university in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Cambridge-focused schools add a further cluster of nearly 10,000 learners, with recent cohorts seeing around 40% of graduates entering medical schools, which signals strong competitive performance into high-demand disciplines.

#### Expansion of International School Networks and Learning Models

These operators are not only expanding in scale but also in the diversity of curricula and learning tools they offer. Sterling schools combine Iraqi and Kurdistan Region curricula with American and Cambridge programmes, giving families multiple recognised pathways at secondary level. Classrooms are increasingly technology-enabled: Sterling, for example, has introduced 4K smart boards across classrooms and aligned both international and Iraqi textbook materials so that local-language subjects can also be taught using digital content. Cambridge-oriented schools invest heavily in professional development to support demanding IGCSE and A-level provision, with accredited Cambridge teacher trainers now operating in-country and training staff across five schools. This combination of international curricula, digital tools and structured teacher development progressively raises the academic and operational benchmark for the wider school system.

#### Raising Standards through Exam-Based Regulation

A major regulatory development occurred only two to three months before the conference, when rules were approved to recognise external examinations—such as SAT, AP, A-level and IGCSE—for entry into Iraqi universities, both public and private. This reform replaces the previous reliance on a single centralised exam and sets performance thresholds that align with UK and US university standards. For schools, this provides long-sought clarity that their graduates can access local higher education in a major of their choice through international exams, while for regulators it creates a filter that ensures only high-quality international providers can operate in the Iraqi market.

## Connecting Schools to Iraqi and International Universities

On the higher-education side, a new mechanism has been established to admit graduates of international schools into Iraqi government universities based explicitly on international test results, including IB and I-level for British-style programmes and SAT and IB for American-style programmes. In parallel, foreign universities are expanding inside Iraq: two existing institutions—the American University in Baghdad and a foreign medical university in Karbala—have recently been joined by three new universities, namely a British university and a Malaysian university in Baghdad, and an Australian university in Basra. A direct-admission mechanism has been created for these international universities, with a first practical case in which graduates from a British school in Baghdad were admitted directly into the American University in Baghdad. As a result, graduates from international and private schools now have two structured options: central admission into public and private universities based on international exams, or direct admission into Iraqi international universities. This dual-path architecture significantly broadens high-quality local options for students who previously had to leave the country to pursue comparable opportunities.

## 4. Securing Foundations: Teacher Quality, Inclusion and Early Childhood

Teacher capacity and early learning emerged as the foundation on which all other reforms depend. Across Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, schools report serious difficulty in recruiting qualified, trained teachers, particularly for Grade 11 and 12 classes delivering demanding international programmes such as Cambridge AS and A Levels, which are described as equivalent to the first year of university study. To address this, one provider has developed in-country professional development capacity, with the first accredited Cambridge teacher trainer in Iraq now training staff across five schools that together educate nearly 10,000 students, 40% of whose most recent graduating cohort progressed to medical schools. Yet the wider system still faces a nationwide shortage of qualified staff, underlining that professional standards and continuous development must become systemic rather than isolated initiatives.

### Addressing Teacher Shortages and Professional Development

The demand for qualified teachers is portrayed as both a local and global challenge. Even in the UK there is currently a need for around 4,000 teachers, and one education company notes that this kind of shortage has persisted for the 140 years since its founding. In Iraq, the problem is sharper in specialist upper-secondary and international programmes, where schools struggle to find staff with the subject depth and pedagogical skills needed to deliver advanced curricula. In response, operators are investing in internal training systems and technology, including personalised adaptive learning programmes that allow students to learn independently, partially offsetting teacher shortages while maintaining quality. Parallel to this, the British Council and the Ministry of Education have worked over many years on performance-focused programmes, aiming not just to train but to improve the classroom performance of teachers and school principals as a core driver of system change.

## Transforming School Leadership and System Mindsets at Scale

Beyond individual teachers, large-scale efforts target leadership and mindset across the system. British Council initiatives are designed for a system that serves 14 million learners, including about 450,000 children currently unable to attend school because of different types of disability, especially physical disabilities. Programmes have focused on approximately 36,000 school principals and 8,000 supervisors, recognising them as leaders of the educational process whose beliefs and capabilities shape what happens in classrooms nationwide. One of the biggest challenges identified is changing the mindset of almost a million teachers in Iraq so that they can better support the 60–70% of each generation who currently do not complete secondary school, rather than focusing only on the small proportion who reach higher education. This long-term work on leadership and attitudes is woven into a 10-year national training and education strategy running from 2022 to 2031, which explicitly includes teachers and their representative bodies.

## Inclusive and Early Childhood Education as System Priorities

Inclusion and early childhood are treated as strategic priorities rather than peripheral concerns. The Ministry of Education has long operated special education streams for certain categories of disability, and more recently has introduced integrated education so that learners with special needs join mainstream classes after Grade 4, supported by trained staff and evolving programmes. At the same time, legal reforms are under way to shift compulsory education from starting at age six to allowing enrolment from age four, with explicit recognition of the importance of learning from birth to age three as the true foundation of later success. A World Bank-supported “Read at Home” initiative is piloting new early childhood approaches in around 200 schools, with samples drawn from 200 families, before potential national rollout. Together with British Council programmes focused on basic reading, writing and emotional development in the first five school years, these efforts aim to ensure that every child—regardless of disability or background—acquires core skills and resilience early enough to benefit from the broader reforms taking shape across the system.

## 5. Key Takeaways & Priority Actions

**Empowering Education Stakeholders for Basra and Iraq's Future:** Iraq's education ecosystem brings together ministries, universities, schools, industry and international partners around a shared goal: building a system that can serve millions of learners, support national renewal and respond to labour-market needs. The priority now is to translate strategies, laws and pilots into coordinated action tailored to each stakeholder group while maintaining a common focus on human development, employability and inclusion.

### Ministry of Education & Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research

As stewards of national strategy, legislation and system architecture, ministries hold the levers to scale successful pilots and ensure coherence from early childhood to higher education.

#### Recommended Actions:



- Finalise and operationalise the 10-year training and education strategy, with clear milestones for teachers, principals and supervisors.
- Expand early childhood reforms that lower the starting age of compulsory education and support learning from birth to age three.
- Systematically embed inclusive education by scaling integrated models for learners with disabilities beyond current pilot schools.
- Align regulations on international exams, national curricula and admission mechanisms so that all recognised pathways are transparent and predictable.
- Use system-level data (on the 14 million learners, 36,000 principals, 8,000 supervisors and 450,000 out-of-school children with disabilities) to prioritise investments where the gaps are greatest.

### Basra & Iraqi Public Universities and Technical Institutions

Universities and technical institutes are central to converting educational attainment into employability, entrepreneurship and regional economic value.

## Recommended Actions:



- Fully activate industrial advisory councils in Basra and other governorates to co-design programmes with major employers.
- Make systematic use of graduate follow-up units to track employment outcomes and adjust curricula based on real labour-market feedback.
- Leverage new legal powers around science, technology and investment to create applied research centres and spin-off activities linked to local industry.
- Coordinate with ministries on clear admission channels for graduates of international and private schools using recognised external examinations.
- Prioritise partnerships with technical and vocational providers to strengthen practice-oriented programmes aligned with manufacturing, energy and services.

## Private & International School Operators in Iraq

Private and international schools serve tens of thousands of students and set demanding benchmarks through multi-curriculum models and external examinations.

### Recommended Actions:



- Continue aligning national, American and Cambridge/IGCSE strands with new university-recognition rules to give students clear, locally viable pathways.
- Invest further in teacher training, including in-country accreditation and mentoring models that can reach staff across networks of schools.
- Use learning technologies (such as 4K smart boards and adaptive learning platforms) to support consistency of quality across all branches.
- Share performance data (for example, progression rates to medical and other high-demand faculties) with regulators and partners to inform policy.
- Partner with public authorities on scholarships or outreach mechanisms to widen access for capable students from lower-income backgrounds, where feasible within existing models.

## Foreign and International University Providers

International universities in Baghdad, Karbala and Basra add capacity and global standards to the higher-education landscape.

## Recommended Actions:



- Deepen collaboration with ministries on the direct-admission mechanism so it remains transparent, predictable and aligned with international tests.
- Build structured bridges with international and private schools inside Iraq, offering clear entry requirements and progression maps for their graduates.
- Develop joint programmes and research initiatives with Iraqi public universities, particularly in disciplines that support economic diversification.
- Invest in faculty development and quality assurance systems that demonstrate long-term commitment to the Iraqi context.
- Engage with local communities and authorities in Basra and other cities to ensure campuses contribute to regional development priorities.

## Basra-Based and Iraqi Industrial / Private-Sector Employers

Industrial and private-sector employers are both end-users of talent and co-designers of relevant skills, especially in Basra's energy and manufacturing hubs.

### Recommended Actions:



- Actively participate in industrial advisory councils and curriculum review processes at universities and technical institutes.
- Provide structured internships, apprenticeships and project-based learning opportunities that familiarise students with real work environments.
- Communicate evolving skills requirements—technical, digital and soft skills—to education partners in a regular, data-driven way.
- Co-invest in specialised labs, training centres or scholarships that strengthen the talent pipeline for critical roles.
- Support initiatives that encourage entrepreneurship among graduates, including mentorship and seed-funding schemes where appropriate.

## International Education and Development Partners (e.g., UNICEF)

International partners connect Iraq to global expertise and help design programmes at the scale of millions of learners and hundreds of thousands of educators.

## Recommended Actions:



- Continue co-developing large-scale programmes on teacher performance, school leadership, inclusive education and early childhood with Iraqi ministries.
- Support monitoring and evaluation systems that capture learning from pilots (such as early-grade reading and “read at home” initiatives in 200 schools) for national rollout.
- Facilitate peer learning between Iraqi institutions and international counterparts on legal reform, governance and quality assurance.
- Use convening power—through platforms like IBBC—to keep government, private sector and education providers aligned around shared priorities for Basra and Iraq.
- Help mobilise blended finance and technical assistance for long-term investments in human capital rather than short-term projects.

## Conclusion

Taken together, these actions define a shared agenda: a system where laws, schools, universities, employers and international partners work in concert to serve every learner, from early childhood through to employment. By coordinating around their respective roles and strengths, stakeholders can turn existing strategies, reforms and pilots into a sustained transformation that supports Basra’s growth and Iraq’s wider economic and social renewal.

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IBBC is the **organiser of the conference and webinar series**, bringing together business, policy, and institutional leaders across Iraq, the UK, and international markets. As the official host, IBBC convenes a diverse community of organisations, investors, and experts to advance dialogue, collaboration, and opportunities aimed at supporting Iraq's economic and sectoral development.

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### Contact:

IBBC – Office 333, China Works, Black Prince Road, Vauxhall, London SE1 7SJ, UK

Tel: +44 20 7227 7100

Email: [london@webuildiraq.org](mailto:london@webuildiraq.org)

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### Contact us

#### Management Partners

Shangri-La hotel/Offices, 8th floor Sheikh Zayed Road, P.O. Box 454390, Dubai, UAE.

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