

Students Abuse University Admissions Scheme

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Well-connected students exploit programme designed to get former peshmerga into higher education. The University of Koya in the Iraqi president's hometown is facing a struggle to maintain academic standards as more than half of the students studying there were accepted without the required grades.

When the Kurdish government introduced a new academic system in the region between the late Nineties and early 2000, it granted ex-peshmerga what's known as "Special Acceptance", meaning they could go to university without meeting the official entrance requirements.

The Kurdish fighters had lost out on an education during their struggle with the Ba'ath regime, but after the autonomous Kurdish region was established in 1991 they settled back into civilian life.

However, many students who've entered the university in eastern Iraqi Kurdistan through the positive discrimination programme were still children at the time of the Kurdish uprising, and managed to get places because they were members of the ruling Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, or had influential contacts in the party.

The PUK ruled the eastern part of Iraqi Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, held sway in the west for around a decade before the two administrations were unified last year.

A 21-year old student who was just six during the 1991 struggle against the Saddam regime admitted that he got into Koya university with the help of a relative who is a PUK official. "I know it is illegal but I wanted to study at the university," he said. He refused to give his name in case he got expelled.

Most of the special acceptances were put forward by affiliates of the PUK. University officials say around 2,600 of the 3,500 students received such preferential treatment.

Until 1991, there was only one higher education institute in the region, the University of Salahadin in Erbil. Since then, the Kurdish government has re-established the University of Sulaimaniyah that had been shut down by the central government and later founded the University of Dohuk and, most recently in the late 1990s, the University of Koya.

Koya, the hometown of Iraqi president Jalal Talabani, has recently benefited from government investment, the university receiving a 259 million US dollar overhaul last year.

Although university officials at Koya say they've ceased the special acceptance provision, they admit they are currently facing academic challenges because many of the students that came through the scheme cannot keep up with the workload.

Professor Khidr Massoum, president of the university, accused former colleagues of having been too close to parities and politicians. "Special acceptance is part of corruption," he said.

Rebwar Sabir, head of Students Federation, an umbrella organisation for 13 students associations, said it had been a “serious mistake” and suggests that the peshmerga who’d lost out on education during the years of conflict should have been compensated in other ways.

Ordinary students who’ve worked hard to get a place at university have been strongly critical of special acceptance. History senior Blind Abdullad said the provision had made them feel “discouraged and tired of studying”.

There has been much criticism of the student wing of the PUK, the Kurdistan Students Association, for supporting the programme.

Aram Sami, a spokesman for the association, accepts that the practice was wrong and probably caused problems at the university, but insists that group “didn’t put pressure on the university”.

The faculties with the highest proportion of the special acceptances have been the departments of history, geography and psychology and the law school.

The abuse of the preferential admissions programme by well-connected youngsters who never fought as peshmerga has clearly undermined its reputation, and forced the few students who actually battled the regime onto the defensive.

“This is our right, we are allowed to study because of our struggle,” insisted Omar Mohammad, 45, a psychology student.

But regular students also complain about favouritism that goes beyond being admitted without proper grades. Special acceptances, they claim, regularly miss class and pass exams without seemingly putting in any work.

History student Abdulrahim became suspicious after a colleague who’d won a place on the peshmerga programme failed nine exams but then passed all of them at the second attempt. “He passed and I still have to study,” he said.

University president Massoum believes that it is too late to do anything about the special acceptances now. “[Teaching staff] have to cope with them and wait until they all graduate,” he said. “We have many who are seniors. If we kick them out now, it will only cause new problems.”

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