

Tuition Fees Spiral at Private Colleges

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Fee-paying students in Baghdad struggle to meet rising course costs.

The start of a new academic year in Iraq has brought unwelcome news for students at private colleges in Baghdad – the discovery that their tuition fees have increased yet again.

Twenty-three year old Sarmad al-Zobaei is a third year student at al-Rafidein private college in Baghdad's Palestine district. For him, the annual increase has become a recurring nightmare.

“Why do the colleges do this? As the beginning of the academic year approaches, all I can think about is how to get the money to pay my fees and how much this year's increase will be,” he told IWPR.

Final-year students say they have no option but to meet the rising costs if they are to complete their degrees. A number of poorer students, however, are contemplating giving up their studies. Most are already working through their summer vacations, but they say they need the money to support their families on top of paying their tuition fees.

Haidar Muhammad, also studying at al-Rafidein, is the only breadwinner in his family.

“My father is dead and my brothers are too young to work, so I have to work as a carpenter to earn money for my family and pay my college fees,” he said. “I can't go back to college this year because I can't pay the fees. If the situation doesn't change, I'll have to drop out completely.”

Ghasan Abdulzahra, a third year student at al-Rafidein, has already taken a two year study break to earn enough money to pay for his final year's tuition. “I'm 26, which is older than most people on my course, but I had to work as a soldier in a facilities protection battalion so as to be able to continue studying.”

Al-Rafidein is not the only private college in the capital to have raised its fees over successive years. Al-Mamoon, Baghdad and al-Mansoor colleges have also increased their tuition costs – without, students are quick to point out, a comparable improvement in the services or facilities they are offered. Al-Rafidein – housed in what used to be a kindergarten – has only a limited number of cramped classrooms, and is short of computers.

Teaching staff at the colleges argue that tuition fees need to keep increasing to keep pace with salary costs.

“Private colleges are financed and run independently, so we rely entirely on the revenue generated by our students,” explained Hilal Muhammad, dean of al-Rafidein. “The bulk of the fees go to cover the salary costs of professors and lecturers. If the rates we offer aren't competitive with government institutions, no teaching staff will stay in the private sector.”

Commercially-run colleges first appeared in Baghdad in the late Eighties, offering further education to students who lacked the grades to attend state-run universities. In the years that followed, the number of private institutions grew exponentially, and there are now around 20 operating in the city.

To meet the rising costs of education in the private sector, student numbers need to be kept high, with up to 50 students jostling for space and resources in some classes.

“Frankly, student numbers are high,” admitted Dr Muhammed. “We have three students to each computer.”

Despite the lack of resources, al-Rafidein college has introduced substantial rises in the annual fees it charges. This year, the cost of classes in the research and statistics department have doubled, from 250,000 to 500,000 Iraq dinars, about 340 US dollars. This is in a city where the average monthly wage is around 400,000 dinars.

Computer science courses at al-Rafidein are now priced at a million dinars (690 dollars), a 54 per cent rise in nominal terms from the previous 650,000. The communications and computer engineering department is also charging a million dinars, up from last year’s 850,000 dinars.

Dr Hilal blamed the increases on the need to compete with the annual round of wage rises at public-sector universities, “The school year starts in October. The government decided to raise professors’ salaries, so we were obliged to do the same in order to retain our staff. There are no regulations in place to prevent this happening at the moment.”

Professor Mustafa Rauf, a lecturer at al-Rafidein, said the money is going towards guaranteeing a high standard of education, “People at private institutions have a right to study in well maintained buildings, with qualified professors and the right equipment for their courses.”

Students, however, remain concerned that if tuition fees continue rising year after year, access to private education will be denied to all but the richest.

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