

أثر برامج دراسات السلام
تحليل نوعي لخريجي جامعة دهوك من خلال اختيار مجموعات التركيز.

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The Effects of Peace Studies Program A Qualitative Analysis of Graduates at the University of Duhok through Focus Group Selection

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المخلص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف وتقييم أثر برامج دراسات السلام على جامعة دهوك، من حيث تأثيرها على خريجي هذا التخصص النادر والجديد في العراق وإقليم كردستان، وكيفية أدائهم ومساهماتهم في سوق العمل بعد التخرج. وقد استُخدم في هذه الدراسة منهج البحث التشاركي للتفاعل مع المشاركين وجمع المعلومات منهم لتحقيق أهداف الدراسة. شاركت مجموعة تركيز مؤلفة من تسعة أعضاء هيئة تدريس من قسم دراسات السلام في هذه الدراسة كباحثين مساعدين لتوجيه الباحث الرئيسي واختيار خريجي هذا المجال لإجراء المقابلات معهم. وقد تم اختيار ثلاثة عشر خريجاً من مختلف المستويات الدراسية (بكالوريوس، دبلوم دراسات عليا، ماجستير، ودكتوراه) للمشاركة في الدراسة. جميعهم يتمتعون بأداء متميز وفعالية في قطاعات

التعليم، والمجتمع المدني (المنظمات غير الحكومية)، والقطاع العام. وقد توصلت الدراسة إلى نتائج وتوصيات هامة من شأنها أن تسهم في تطوير المناهج والبرامج الأكاديمية بما يتماشى مع احتياجات سوق العمل والمجتمع. على الرغم من انضمام خريجي الدفقات المختلفة إلى المكاتب الحكومية والشركات الخاصة والمؤسسات والمنظمات المدنية، إلا أنه لا توجد دراسات أو أبحاث تُقيّم أثر هذا التخصص على الأفراد والمجتمع ككل. تُحدد هذه الدراسة مشكلة البحث، وهي معرفة أثر برامج دراسات السلام على خريجي جامعة دهوك، وكيف تُشكّل المعرفة المكتسبة من هذه البرامج تصورات الطلاب ووجهات نظرهم بعد التخرج في مختلف مجالات التخصص. تكتسب هذه الدراسة أهمية بالغة لتقييم مخرجات هذا التخصص من حيث إمكانية تطبيقه في سوق العمل وإحداث تغيير إيجابي على المستويين الفردي والمجتمعي. علاوة على ذلك، تعتمد الدراسة منهجاً تشاركياً نادراً في البحوث التطبيقية في إقليم كردستان والعراق. ومن خلال هذا المنهج، تستند الدراسة إلى قيم وممارسات دراسات السلام عبر إشراك أصحاب المصلحة الرئيسيين في عملية البحث والاستعانة بهم كباحثين ثانويين، مما يُتيح إجراء دراسة علمية دقيقة. تتكون هذه الدراسة من أربعة أقسام رئيسية. يتناول القسم الأول الإطار النظري والمفاهيمي لمجال دراسات السلام. يركز القسم الثاني على المنهجية وإجراءات البحث المستخدمة في هذه الدراسة. ويتضمن القسم الثالث نتائج المقابلات التي أُجريت مع المشاركين في الدراسة. أما القسم الرابع، فيتضمن تحليلاً لنتائج المقابلات، ويختتم بأهم النتائج والتوصيات لتطوير برامج دراسات السلام في جامعة دهوك.

Abstract

The current study is attempting to explore and evaluate the effect of Peace Studies programs upon the University of Duhok in terms of the effect it has on graduates of this rare and novel specialization in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, and how they are performing and contributing in the labor market after graduation. A Participatory Research approach has been used in the study to interact with participants and get information from them to achieve the objectives of the study. A focus group of nine faculty members from Peace Studies Department have participated in the study as secondary researchers to guide the researcher to right direction and choose graduates of the department to be interviewed. Thirteen graduates from different levels of study (bachelor, postgraduate diploma, master, and PhD) have been selected for the study. All of them are performing and are effective in education sector, civil society (NGO), and public sector. The study has reached to some important findings and



recommendations that would help to develop academic curricula and programs in line with needs of labor market and society. Although the graduates of various batches have joined government offices, private companies and civil institutions and organizations, there is no research or study to evaluate the effect of this specialized field on individuals and society at large. This study formulates the problem of the study, which is to know the effect of Peace Studies programs on graduates of the University of Duhok, and how the knowledge obtained from the study programs shape the perceptions and points of view of the students after graduation in different fields of specialization. This study is important to assess the outcomes of this specialization in terms of how it could operate in the job market and bring positive change at individual and societal levels. Furthermore, the study employs participatory approach that is rare in applied research within the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. By employing this approach, the study is grounded in the values and practices of Peace Studies by bringing in key stakeholders to the research process and utilizing them as secondary researchers; this allows for a rigorous scientific study. This study consists of four main sections. The first section of the study is concerned with the theoretical and conceptual framework of the field of study of Peace Studies. The second section is focused on the methodology and the research procedures used in the current study. The third section includes results of interviews conducted with participants in the study. The fourth section included an analysis of results of the interviews that ends with the most important findings and recommendations for developing the field of Peace Studies programs at the University of Duhok.

Introduction

Universities have a significant role to play in consolidating peace and stabilising a country after conflict to help transform society. In addition to equipping students with knowledge, higher education institutions must also equip students with the skills to make an impact as professionals in a post-conflict society. In the Kurdistan Region and the rest of Iraq, there was a need for universities to introduce specialised academic programmes that would help produce qualified personnel equipped with the scientific and practical skills needed to tackle today's peace-related challenges. The University of Duhok was the first university in Iraq to introduce such a programme in 2001 with the Master's degree in Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution. This field of study was transformed into a specialised department in 2016, that was able to introduce a bachelor degree in Peace and Human Rights Studies.

Although the graduates of various batches have joined government offices, private companies and civil institutions and organizations, there is no research or study to evaluate the effect of this specialized field on individuals and society at large. This study formulates the problem of the study, which is to know the effect of Peace Studies programs on graduates of the University of Duhok, and how the knowledge obtained from the study programs shape the perceptions and points of view of the students after graduation in different fields of specialization. This study is important to assess the outcomes of this specialization in terms of how it could operate in the job market and bring positive change at individual and societal levels. Furthermore, the study employs participatory approach that is rare in applied research within the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. By employing this approach, the study is grounded in the values and practices of Peace Studies by bringing in key stakeholders to the research process and utilizing them as secondary researchers; this allows for a rigorous scientific study. This study consists of four main sections. The first section of the study is concerned with the theoretical and conceptual framework of the field of study of Peace Studies. The second section is focused on the methodology and the research procedures used in the current study. The third section includes results of interviews conducted with participants in the study. The fourth section included an analysis of results of the interviews that ends with the most important findings and recommendations for developing the field of Peace Studies programs at the University of Duhok.

1.Theoretical Framework

The field of Peace Studies, multidisciplinary by nature, is rapidly growing world-wide. The need to address ongoing and emerging conflicts in various regions of the world calls for the cultivation of a more peaceful global community that is just and stable. As a new academic field, Peace Studies has found acceptance and relevance in universities and research centers around the globe and has an unmistakable presence in many institutions of higher education. This section deals with the teaching curricula and courses offered in the field of Peace Education at various levels, with a focus on conceptualizing this field at both theoretical and practical levels.

This section introduces the theoretical frameworks that help us understand the contexts and circumstances in which the discipline of peace studies is developing; globally, regionally or locally.

This section is divided into two sub-sections. The first discusses the meaning and definition of peace. The second focuses on Peace Studies



and it traces the background of its emergence and expansion and attempts to inculcate it into the various disciplines' curricula.

1.1Peace Concept

(Galtung, 1996, pp. 9–10) defines peace as a positive process, not just the absence of war, and includes putting an end to violence and creating conditions that pave the way for preventing conflicts from escalating to violence. Galtung presents “negative peace” as opposed to “positive peace”, noting that “negative peace” is simply the absence of direct violence, such as violent acts (war) or even physical harm, while “positive peace” has a broader meaning and includes the elimination of structural violence and cultural violence, such as oppression, inequality, and social and economic injustice, thus leading to the development of relations between the parties.

There is still debate among sociologists and peace historians about how to define the field of peace history, but at the same time specialists in this field criticize historical studies for their excessive focus on war and conflict, which they have criticized for reinforcing the culture of conflict (Peterson et al., 2018, p. 8). Although there is a consensus on the concept of peace—often associated with harmony and the absence of conflict or violence, and something humans always strive to achieve—it carries different connotations depending on the context and environment in which it is used. Given the differences surrounding this conceptual ambiguity, the means of achieving peace, whether through violent or nonviolent means, are also numerous and varied. Despite this diversity, peace as an ultimate goal is generally accepted, a state to which humans continually aspire (Fast, 2001, pp. 2–3). Others believe that the term peace is not merely the absence of violence, but rather extends to the real existence of social, economic, and political justice and the absence of all forms of injustice, such as poverty, discrimination, and inequality, which are the root causes of conflict. Therefore, we see that all international professional human rights organizations and bodies call for the building of a society based on justice and peace (Hoti & Ahmed, 2016, p. 324).

1.2Peace Studies

The evolution of peace and conflict studies is delineated by Dar through a five-stage analysis, outlining historical transitions in how the discipline has approached conflict and peace studies in relation to international developments (Dar, 2015, pp. 50–64).

1. The developmental stage (from the Thirty Years' War to 1914)

This stage opened with the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and the Treaties of Westphalia (1648) which recognised the principle of the

nation state. At this time Hugo Grotius wrote his work *On the Law of War and Peace* (1625), expounding new ideas on the concept of just war and influencing the course of political theory in the next century. These events were accompanied by conflict in Europe and in North America, and led to further reflections by philosophers, notably Hobbes, Locke and Kant on the nature of peace and how it could be attained. In time, attempts were made to study the subject in order to encourage pacifist attitudes and behaviour, and the element of class conflict was explored by Marx and Lenin. Later, ideas associated with the various religions of the world have been sought out in the hope of promoting peace, but as yet without lasting success. The stage concluded with the outbreak of World War I.

2. Post-developmental period (World Wars, 1914–1945):

Following the two World Wars, the period of the 20th century was marked by anti-war peace movements that led to the founding of the League of Nations (1920) after the Treaties of Paris (1919-20) yet the second world war occurred. Many religious and community groups were practicing and promoting nonviolence at this time. This period is often known as the beginning of the academic discipline of Peace Studies. An interdisciplinary field of research, teaching, and activism, Peace Studies focuses on finding ways to prevent wars and on trying to understand their causes.

4. Institutional and Academic Phase (1946-1990):

After the second world war the horror of nuclear weapons again revived all pro-peace movements worldwide. It was the time of founding the United Nations (1945). Soon peace studies began to develop also in an academic form in the 50's and 60's at places like the Journal of Conflict Resolution (1957), the Center for Conflict Research (1959) and the two first Peace Research Institutes: PRIO in Oslo (1966) and SII in Stockholm (1966). During this period Galtung coined the terms of positive and negative peace.

5. The contemporary period (1990-present):

The start of the 1990s marked a pivotal moment in history, as it was the year after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which in turn led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the end of the Cold War. At the same time, the world entered a new era and a new world order. The study of peace and conflict studies seemed to lose importance as the ideological conflicts between super powers seemed to have disappeared. These major shifts affected peace and conflict studies as their importance initially seemed to decline with the end of the ideological conflicts between the two superpowers. Fukuyama suggested that ideological





conflicts would disappear(Fukuyama, 1992), while Huntington predicted that conflicts would become centered more on ethnic, religious, and national causes(Huntington, 1996).

Throughout many decades, the interdisciplinary field of Peace Studies has contributed in significant ways to a number of disciplines including Religious Studies. The field has gained a lot of support and interest in the post-World War II period. While Peace Studies as a field is becoming more institutionalized with the establishment of centers that support and house peace studies programs; the inclusion of the study of peace in educational systems (K-16, colleges and universities); publication of books on various topics in peace studies; refereed scholarly articles, book chapters and book reviews that focus on aspects of peace studies; and the establishment of professional associations, refereed journals and annual conferences in the field (Peterson et al., 2018, p. 2). Peace Studies focuses on defining peace, which is the point that distinguishes it from other similar fields; the apparent normative content of peace studies, distinguishes peace studies from international relations and strategic studies. Peace studies present war as a problem that needs to be solved from its roots(Lawler, 2004, p. 74).

Meanwhile, Peace Studies, which is essentially a multidisciplinary field, presupposes the study of violence. If violence is the problem, then peace is ultimately the solution. Therefore, all parties must work, research, and educate in this field, which explores the causes of conflict, violence, and bloodshed. The International Peace Research Association (IPRA) identifies 18 missions, among which are education and study at all levels as a means of transforming culture. According to IPRA 's missions, it has its own definitions, and the task of redefining them lies with research efforts. According to Galtung, Peace Studies may contribute to peace through research-based knowledge, but it does not stop violence, dismantle violent structures, or build direct, structural, or cultural peace. Those who do this are skilled individuals, as skill is the result of field knowledge, empathy, perseverance, and imagination(Galtung, 1996, pp. 31–34).

Furthermore, Peace Studies can be said to be an academic discipline as well as a complex process. It is a process that aims to change lives and change societies by changing their negative attitudes, behaviors and values. Peace Studies and conflict resolution are closely linked to increasing our understanding of violence and eradicating wars at various levels between and within countries. These actions are important for sustaining peace. Overcoming violence includes overcoming the psychological and structural barriers resulting from long-standing

conflict. Building effective peace depends on a wide range of rules that are influenced by human interactions and perceptions and by the social environment after a conflict has ended(Reimer et al., 2016, p. 12). Therefore, the initial efforts to establish the field of Peace Studies relied on blending methodological and intellectual frameworks from other fields. This academic blending led to the creation of a unique field of peace and conflict studies, in which academic departments and programs have specialized throughout the world. The field of peace and conflict studies, in addition to being multi-faceted academically by virtue of its origin, is also multi-faceted in its applications, as it deals with conflicts and peacebuilding at the international, national, societal, and even family levels(Abdulla et al., 2021, pp. 11–12).

Galtung asserts that the field of peace and conflict studies is a discipline with theories and academic journals. He also argues that peace studies is an applied social science that focuses on people in a social environment and has clear value orientations. He identifies three branches of knowledge within peace studies, which in itself constitutes the richness and diverse nature of the discipline. These three branches are empirical peace studies, critical peace studies, and constructive peace studies(Karbo, 2011, p. 17).

On the other hand, the field of Peace Studies is unique in many ways, that distinguish it from other fields of study in the humanities and social sciences, including but not limited to: its multidisciplinary methodologies, its emphasis on applying culturally appropriate methodologies, its collaborative/participatory approach, and its emphasis on participatory and interactive learning. These characteristics distinguish Peace Studies from all academic fields, in which the average person may not have any prior experience or knowledge. Therefore, education in the field of Peace Studies encourages the exchange of this knowledge and experience, which helps all students to discover a diversity of experiences. In addition, the field of peace and conflict resolution always aims to develop and refine skills and behaviors that support peace efforts, and this requires employing the classroom in innovative and interactive ways that allow the student to practice and apply those skills naturally(Abdulla et al., 2021, pp. 20–23).

2.Methodology and Research Procedures

This section describes the methodology of the research. It is divided into two parts. The first part describes the philosophy, logic, methods and research approach of participatory research. The second part describes the





procedures for data collection and for obtaining and analysing scientific results.

2.1 Participatory Research

This sub-section introduces participatory research as one of the key approaches taken in contemporary academic research and then outlines the core characteristics of participatory research. This is followed by the main objectives of the approach, which are to empower participants, to create context-sensitive knowledge and sustainable effects. The sub-section then outlines the essential elements of participatory research.

2.1.1 Definition

(Selener, 1997, p. 12) defines participatory research as the process of identifying a problem by members of a community, collecting and analyzing information from them, and then working to find solutions and promote transformation. While (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 5) believe research is not considered procedural unless it is collaborative and participatory, pointing out that this type of work, by definition, is collaborative because it does not occur in the context of any group with a common interest in improving its situation. Thus, participatory research is a scientific approach that ensures the participation of participants in research. (Salmon, 2007, p. 285).

Moreover (Kingery et al., 2016, p. 93) attempt to define the participatory approach as a research process in which community members are not merely subjects of research, but rather active partners in identifying their needs, analyzing them, and finding ways to address them.

This approach bridges the gap between external data and self-identified local needs. It involves working with ordinary people to identify their needs. Through this participatory process, knowledge is generated and involves participants working with facilitators as co-researchers (Gibbon, 2002, pp. 547–548).

Thus, Participatory research is a qualitative research methodology option. It is considered a democratic, fair, and liberating approach that distinguishes it from other qualitative methodologies. It makes informed decisions to reach results that seek social change and generate local knowledge (MacDonald, 2012, pp. 34–35).

2.1.2 Characteristics of Participatory Research

Participatory research helps participants work together to align their individual and collective practices with standards that represent justice, sustainability, and rationality. (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 22). Participatory research has several characteristics consistent with the spirit of scientific research, including: 1. Non-interference cooperation through respect for decisions, regardless of differences of opinion. 2. Participants retain



ownership of knowledge and results. 3. Over time and patience, participants gain mutual trust and respect across cultures, ages, classes, and ethnicities. 4. Everyone's interests are important through reciprocity and equality (Bradbury & Reason, 2003, p. 162).

Others have described the characteristics of participatory research as: 1. Participatory research practice satisfies the desire of researchers and participants to work creatively to address questions and problems of concern to them, whether in communities or organizations. 2. Participatory research practices facilitate interaction with people through collaborative forms of inquiry that open up new spaces and modes of dialogue. 3. Participatory research draws upon a variety of methods and approaches for the production of local knowledge. 4. Participatory research practice is values-driven and seeks to nurture the development of the communities and the wider environment in which they operate for the purposes of addressing issues that affect them all (Reason & Bradbury, 2017, pp. 3–4).

Thus, listening attentively to people's voices and respecting their lived experiences are among the most important characteristics of participatory research, based on the fact that the foundation of knowledge stems from reality. Therefore, the research starts from the bottom up, not from the top down, and its purpose is for academics (Gaffney, 2008, pp. 16–32).

Therefore, participatory research is also characterized by a set of characteristics (Alswaiti, 2019, pp. 25–26):

1. Participatory research is a social process:

Participatory research approaches focus on the individual/group relation. Socialization is not a separate aspect that can be dealt with and viewed independently of the individual. Instead, the possible relationships between the process of individual formation and the social forces that continuously (re)shape the individual are explored. In and through the experiences of socialization, the processes that shape the individual and the collective experiences of the self are explored.

2. Participatory research is a participatory process:

Participatory research involves also enabling participation at the knowledge level: i.e. participation in assessing existing knowledge (understanding, skills, experience-based knowledge/ values) and how people make sense of themselves and their particular strengths and difficulties in both the social world and in physical environment.

3- Participatory research is liberating:

Participatory research is about unravelling the restrictions imposed by unjust and restrictive social structures and help people recover from the



effects of these on their potential for self-growth and self-determinate life.

4- Participatory research is reflexive:

Participatory research is more than just a methodology – it is a process to work with people to transform their practices through a series of critical actions and periods of self-criticism.

In other words, Eckhoff notes that participatory research rejects traditional views that view vulnerable groups as passive or deficient individuals, instead placing them in the position of knowledgeable and competent collaborators (Eckhoff, 2019, pp. 3–12).

2.1.3 Aims of Participatory Research

According to (Khanlou & Peter, 2005, pp. 2335–2336) there are many goals that participatory research seeks to achieve: 1. Participatory research aims to bring about structural transformation and empower marginalized and oppressed groups, such as migrants, displaced persons, workers, indigenous peoples, and women, creating a dynamic, cyclical approach; 2. Participatory research aims to enable researchers to become part of the community, engaged in a process that seeks to overcome isolation; 3. Participatory research aims to mobilize people and raise awareness of their capacities and resources; 4. Participatory research aims to create knowledge useful for development change with practical applications.

Thus, participatory research aims to intervene systematically to bring about social transformation and empower oppressed groups to express their real-life experiences, seeking appropriate solutions and expanding the scope of influence horizontally through community responsibility and vertically through supportive authorities (Burns, 2018, pp. 4–40).

To clarify more, participatory research aims to achieve several scientific and research objectives that integrate knowledge and community experience. Some of these objectives can be summarized as follows (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008, pp. 424–425):

1- Participatory research is a method of conducting research with the intention of producing academically valid and practical field-based knowledge that aims to improve the lives of the common folk and will help society as a whole in achieving its noble goals.

2- Participatory research, in order to empower and build capacity of the participants, aims to generate practical solutions and provide applicable interventions that would enhance skills and capacity of the participants to address the problems they are involved in.

3- Participatory research. It aims at an integration of theory and practice-to challenge the conventional view that separates the two in the pursuit of solving problems concurrently.

Drawing on (Cornish et al., 2023, p. 2), “participatory research is about building relationships and creating an enabling environment, dialogue, utilising the range of experience and abilities that participants bring and facilitating critical debate.”

To sum up, (Danley & Ellison, 2005, pp. 4–8) explain the goals of participatory research, which are to link action and knowledge and transform study participants into partners in knowledge production to promote social justice and ethical practices in research.

2.2 Research Procedures

This paper describes the practical process that we used to carry out our research. The process starts with forming a focus group and ends with analysis of the results, and throughout is governed by ethical concerns and an academic outlook.

2.2.1 Definition and Role of the Participatory Focus Group

The research utilised a participatory approach whereby focus groups of faculties were drawn from the Department of Peace and Human Rights Studies at the University of Duhok. Focus groups are a method of data collection whereby participants engage in a guided discussion as a group to provide detailed descriptions of their perspectives, experiences and opinions of the issues pertinent to the research. For this research, using a focus group was an effective way of gaining insight into issues that are complex, sensitive and can facilitate the exchange of views and experience amongst the participants.

A focus group is a form of group interview in which a facilitator (or researcher) asks a series of question to a small group of participants and records the responses. Following the exchange of questions from the facilitator, the group of participants discuss the topic among themselves to produce collective perspectives on the topic. A focus group is therefore a group dialogue among a diverse number of participants. The success of the focus group relies heavily on the researcher’s ability to effectively facilitate the group, and to extract information and expertise from the participants (Ryan et al., 2014, p. 329).

Further, focus groups are a common method of research which involves individuals entering the discussion as a means of researching the views and experiences of various groups of stakeholders at the same time, and are increasingly being used within health research (Winship & Repper, 2007, pp. 128–129).





According to (Ryan et al., 2014, p. 332), in participatory research, the focus group's role as a co-researcher fosters a sense of shared ownership and allows for the analysis of interactions to generate shared insights and build collective knowledge. Focus groups are characterized by several features, including:

1. The focus group role of the co-investigator: In the study participants formed focus groups, where they acted as co-investigators to the principal investigator.
2. Social constructivism: From a theoretical point of view knowledge is constructed through social interaction amongst groups rather than the personal opinions of the individual.
3. The information generated: The information generated by focus groups is tacit social knowledge based on social understanding.
4. Interaction: In the focus groups, the interaction between the participants can evoke new perspectives or stories.

Researchers have also considered using focus groups as a methodology for participatory research approaches in order to build trust and enable participation in project design (Getrich et al., 2016, p. 751).

2.2.2 Focus Group Selection Criteria

In this study participants were selected based on:

In this study participants were selected based on:

1. They are scientific staff holding higher scientific degrees in the field of Peace and Conflict Resolutions Studies. (Assistant Professors, Lecturers, Assistant Lecturers).
2. They are also Alumni of University of Duhok Peace and Conflict Resolutions Studies Programs.
3. They have first hand experience of the transition from academic theory to practical industry applications.
4. Graduates in this program have different academic credentials as they earned their bachelor degrees in Law, Islamic Studies and Media etc.
5. Most members of this group are currently working in the Department of Peace and Human Rights Studies in the College of Humanities, University of Duhok.

The group consisted of 9 faculty members from various departments at the University of Duhok with in-depth knowledge of the department's renowned peace studies program. Although all members hold master's degrees in various disciplines, they have each completed coursework in the University of Duhok's interdisciplinary Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies program, a strong program that has been offered since 2001. (Sadiq, personal communication, February 2, 2025). Keeping a small group size was a strategic decision consistent with established best

practices. The optimal size for a “meaningful conversation” is typically between 4 to 10 participants; this number allows for in-depth conversation while maintaining manageable conversation dynamics (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 330).

2.3 Expert Participants

Two additional faculty and staff members were designated as note takers for the sessions. They included a faculty member with a doctorate in peace education from a university in the United Kingdom and a faculty member with a master's in human rights from Norway. Their inclusion reinforced the participatory research principle that a participatory approach draws on multiple ways of knowing and values insights from both insiders and outsiders.

2.4 Core Responsibilities

During six monthly focus group sessions, this group of co-researchers worked through the processes of collective analysis and learning. Working as co-researchers, their role was to interpret the issues emerging from the narrative data and collaborate with the researcher in the analysis and learning process. The co-researchers worked within a structured process organised into three areas of work.

1. Phase One: Defining the Inquiry: Collaborate to develop study-wide research questions, and clarify the relevance of the study for educators. This phase draws upon the participatory research emphasis of ensuring that research is informed and relevant to a particular context or practice.
2. Phase Two: Designing the Interview Protocol: We will collaboratively develop a set of semi-structured interview questions, and identify a set of graduates who could be considered “success stories” within different industries or professional roles, to test the relevance and cultural appropriateness of the questions.
3. Phase Three- Results Analysis: After conducting the interviews, the focus group analyzes the obtained results and gives comments about the results, whether they are in line with their initial expectations or not.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, all aspects were conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. The participatory approach taken in the study, like other scientific methods, is a rigorous means of protecting the research participants.

The form represents the initial expectations on the part of the researcher concerning the roles and relations that the participant is expected to assume in the research project. The form represents the beginning from which multiple negotiations take place during the process of data collection and interpretation (Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 1103). This form is





therefore a legal requirement which has to be signed by the participants before the process of the interviews begins. The document is thus compulsory. It is an important tool for quality control as it ensures compliance with research ethics standards while at the same time guaranteeing the protection of the participants' anonymity (Journot et al., 2013, pp. 460–462).

A clear and detailed informed consent form was created and distributed to all the participants in this study. The form explained their role in the study and set out their rights.

2.6 Interview Sample: Purposive Random Sampling

Purposive random sampling is a form of systematic sampling in which non-probability sample members are selected in a manner that appears to lack randomness but in reality, is governed by an (invisible) underlying random mechanism amenable to modelling of person probabilities of selection. This approach to analysing a non-probability sample has gained prominence and is considered one of the modern methods, particularly in social research where completely random sampling is often unachievable (Elliott & Valliant, 2017, p. 251).

This study employed purposive sampling in order to ensure that the sample met the objectives and goals of the study; thus, accuracy, reliability of the data, and results were ensured, which is one of the qualitative research purposes and a way to achieve a more in-depth understanding. This methodology was employed to select the sample for this study in order to ensure that the participants possessed insight or information that would be useful to the study. While different from random sampling, the strategies for carrying out a purposive sample are undertaken in order to ensure that the researcher is meeting the study's objective, providing insight or information to issues and ideas discussed within the study, and acquiring diverse and key views of others (Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 653–654).

Building on the comments provided by the participants of the focus group, a purposive sample of alumni from the graduation class (recent graduates of various levels, including bachelor's degrees, postgraduate diplomas, master's degrees, and PhDs) were selected for the study. They are currently working in education sector, civil society organization, government, etc. Their "success stories" represent potential long-term impacts of the studied academic program.

The participants represent the following categories:

- Civil Society: NGO employees.
- Public Sector: Government officials.
- Education: Teachers implementing peace curricula in schools.

- **Ethnicity/Identity:** To ensure objectivity and diversity
The interviews aimed to gather in-depth, qualitative data on the lived experiences of successful graduates. The goal was to understand their personal and societal impact, their motivations, their reflections on the curriculum, their peacebuilding initiatives, and the obstacles they have faced.

2.6.1 Interview Validity

Validify of a research instrument refers to the accuracy of a measuring instrument i.e. does the instrument really measure what it was supposed to measure (in terms of results obtained from the instrument among the study participants as well as among the similar participants not under study). (Ranganathan et al., 2024, p. 43). According to (Creswell, 2021, p. 181) validity refers to the extent to which a measuring instrument measures what it was intended to measure.

The 'Interview themes and questions' document was sent to seven experts in different fields. They evaluated the items based on 'Relevance' and 'Clarity'.

The strength of the correlation between variables can be determined using a number of statistics; most commonly though this is via the Pearson's (r) correlation coefficient. Pearson's correlation coefficient can range from -1.00 (strongest negative correlation) to +1.00 (strongest possible positive correlation) (Price et al., 2012, p. 22).

All the questions in the interview were therefore tested on 7 experts from a range of disciplines including peace studies and conflict resolution, sociology and psychology, politics, education and teaching methods.

Thus, after receiving the responses, the Pearson R correlation coefficient to determine the validity of the questions, was used as follows:

Table1: Expert opinions on the validity of interview questions:

#	Question Numbers	Number of "Yes" Votes	Number of "No" Votes	Validity Percentage
1	2-3-5-6-7-9-10-12-14	7	0	100%
2	4-8-13	6	1	85.71
3	1-11	5	2	71.42

This table shows that the agreement rate for the validity of the interview questions, according to the experts' perspective, reached 90.81%, as calculated using the Pearson R formula, as follows:

Variables Definition

- V: Validity Coefficient (or Content Validity Index).
- C: Total number of agreed/correct items across all experts.



•Ne: Number of experts.

•Nq: Number of questions in the instrument.

•N: Total possible responses ($Ne \times Nq$).

$$V = [C / (Ne \times Nq)] \times 100$$

Calculation: $V = [89 / (7 \times 14)] \times 100 = 90.81\%$

The agreement rate of 90.81 % was also classified as good. For its validity the experts of social field research gave their opinions that if the percentage of validity of the interview questions was greater than 75%, then the research instrument was valid for use in the research.

2.6.2 Interview Analysis

This data was obtained by conducting 13 interviews with 13 graduates of the program as previously described. The analysis of the data involved grouping and coding of the interviews, which were conducted through systematic and rigorous processes as described below.

1. Data Familiarisation: The researcher listened to the audio files and reviewed the transcribed data against the original file, forming an initial impression, recognising salient statements and repeated themes, and identifying particular issues and opinions that participants disclosed.

2. Systematic Data Coding: The researcher systematically coded the data to identify which elements related to motivation, curriculum, society, difficulties, or ideas for improvement were mentioned in the feedback and interviews. The functionality allowed the researcher to organise the data into categories for analysis.

3. Generating initial themes: The related codes were organised into the broader themes, for example: "Motivations for Study", "Curriculum Gaps", "Societal Impact", "Barriers to Implement".

4. Developing and Reviewing Themes: The themes were reviewed and considered relevant to the data and the research questions. The themes were discussed with the focus group and the themes and preliminary analysis interpreted for feedback and validation.

5. Defining, Refining and Naming Themes: The researcher defined the main master themes and extracted the relevant sub-themes from the data which were named accordingly.

6. Writing the Report: Findings were synthesised and themes illustrated with exemplar quotes incorporated into the research report.

2.7 The Translation Process: Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Breslin describes the technique of reverse translation for use in multicultural research, where questions are written in the source language and then translated into the target language by two bilingual individuals. The first individual translates the source language items into the target language and the second individual then translates the items back to the source language without referencing the original items. After translation, the researcher then compares the two sets of items (e words and translations) for accuracy (Brislin, 1970, pp. 185–186).

Interestingly, while proponents argue that this method does not limit itself to word-for-word translation, others argue that this approach actually caters more to a literal translation that fails to yield adequate communicative quality for the users (Colina et al., 2017, p. 276).

This study used the method of reverse translation. Two faculties from the Department of Peace and Human Rights Studies at the University of Duhok, who are bilingual and trilingual in Arabic, Kurdish, and English, assisted in the process. The questions used in the interviews were written in both Kurdish and Arabic.

3. Results and Discussions

This analysis explores the findings from 13 graduate interviews from the University of Duhok's peace education programs, categorized by academic degree, occupation, ethnicity, and gender. The data reveals significant themes regarding academic motivations, personal transformation, professional utility, and societal perceptions of the field.

3.1 Thematic Analysis

THEME1: Motivations and academic experience

-Submission Motivations

Motivations ranged from professional relevance and a desire to understand regional conflicts, to circumstantial reasons such as low admission scores or simply filling out university application forms.

Quotes: "At the University of Duhok, when this department was established, I found it very much connected to my work." (Graduate1)

"I put it only for the sake of filling out the form. I did not expect that among 50 departments, the one that would be least of my interest would appear." (Graduate4)

"When we look at reality, we see endless conflicts and disputes. I said to myself: it's time to understand the reasons behind these conflicts." (Graduate10)

-Curriculum Evaluation





The Effects of Peace Studies Program A Qualitative Analysis of Graduates at the University of Duhok through Focus Group Selection



Graduates appreciated the broad theoretical horizons and international perspectives the curriculum offered, though many criticized it for being overly theoretical, overly legalistic, or disconnected from practical local contexts.

Quotes: "I think the legal background of the professors had a strong influence on the curricula; they focused more on legal aspects." (Graduate2)

"The curriculum leaned heavily toward classical and theoretical approaches at the expense of practical application." (Graduate9)

"The way the curriculum was developed and how it brought minds from different countries... was a very unique experience." (Graduate11)

-Faculty Evaluation

Faculty were generally well-regarded, particularly visiting foreign professors who introduced diverse perspectives, though some local instructors were noted as lacking in specific peace education pedagogy.

Quotes: "The diverse expertise of my professors also influenced me; we had professors from Britain, America, and Sudan." (Graduate5)

"Some were good at delivering the material, while others lacked effective teaching and communication skills." (Graduate8)

-Pedagogy and Activities Evaluation

While interactive workshops and practical activities were highly praised when they occurred, many graduates felt these elements were insufficient and called for more field visits and applied training.

Quotes: "Almost all of the lessons relied on activities to convey the idea more clearly, especially the lessons related to peace and conflict." (Graduate4)

"I personally benefited more from external programs than from the curriculum itself... the practical application in workshops gave us valuable training experience." (Graduate12)

-Knowledge Acquisition

Graduates acquired profound theoretical knowledge in conflict analysis, human rights mechanisms, religious tolerance, and understanding the psychological and systemic roots of disputes.

Quotes: "The workshops covered topics such as acceptance of others, coexistence, conflict analysis, conflict mapping, and violence." (Graduate3)

"I learned a lot of new things, such as negotiation and mediation, how to analyze people, how to analyze problems, power dynamics, and the root causes of problems." (Graduate11)

-Skills Acquisition

Key skills acquired included active listening, negotiation, mediation, conflict mapping, training and facilitation, and effective communication.

Quotes: "Communication and Message Delivery Skills... Training Skills: The ability to organize information and transform it into practical and training-oriented material." (Graduate9)

"I acquired many new skills, such as active listening, how to listen to the other party, and how to find common ground." (Graduate13)

THEME2: Personal Transformation

-Cognitive Shifts

Graduates experienced a major paradigm shift, abandoning regional, tribal, and religious prejudices in favor of open-mindedness, tolerance, and recognizing the systemic nature of conflicts.

Quotes: "Honestly, and without exaggeration, my perspective changed by about 70%. I changed greatly in terms of tolerance." (Graduate2)

"It has moved me from a stage of making preconceived judgments to one of searching for motivations." (Graduate6)

"You don't see things in black and white anymore, or just as good or bad. After studying this field, I started understanding how systems work." (Graduate11)

-Behavioral Changes

Behavioral changes manifested as decreased anger, increased patience, reliance on dialogue over coercion, and improved interpersonal relationships both within families and professional environments.

Quotes: "I used to be prone to anger over a particular crime, but after my studies, I no longer experience that anger. I treat them as a human being, without discrimination." (Graduate1)

"My behavior changed, my tendency toward violence decreased, and I began to think in a peaceful manner." (Graduate8)

THEME3: Professional and Practical Impact

- Career Trajectory

The specialization significantly boosted employability, particularly in the NGO sector, education, and public administration, allowing graduates to secure specialized roles, consulting gigs, and international fellowships.

Quotes: "Job opportunities increased significantly, and thankfully, I don't actively seek employment; rather, employment comes to me." (Graduate5)





"This specialization has set me apart in the job market, as most organizations seek ready-made individuals with prior knowledge and experience." (Graduate6)

-Applied Learning

Graduates directly applied their learning to mediate commercial, tribal, and family disputes, draft project proposals, manage diverse classrooms, and create conflict-sensitive environments in their workplaces.

Quotes: "The study enabled me to play the role of a neutral third-party mediator. I used conflict analysis tools and conflict mapping." (Graduate3)

"In the field of international documentation, I work extensively thanks to my specialization... preparing reports on human rights violations and international crimes." (Graduate7)

-Implementation Challenges

Major challenges included societal resistance to modern human rights terminology (like gender), deeply ingrained tribal dispute mechanisms, and the difficulty of promoting peace in regions still suffering from basic humanitarian and economic deprivations.

Quotes: "We had to use the term social gender because society views the term gender negatively. The social mindset is still closed." (Graduate8)

"The regions have basic needs (electricity, water, services, food). It's difficult to talk to a hungry person about peacebuilding." (Graduate10)

"In Iraq, mediation often happens informally through tribal leaders or respected figures, not always in the formal academic sense." (Graduate11)

THEME4: Societal Contribution

-Community Initiatives and Activities

Graduates actively led major community initiatives, including interfaith dialogues, post-conflict reconciliation sessions, international human rights reporting, and public peace festivals.

Quotes: "I managed to bring together Yazidi figures from the camps and Arab figures in Dohuk, and I facilitated a dialogue session." (Graduate5)

"Our most important project was the Salam Pass... We brought participants from different areas in four buses. We held a concert." (Graduate10)

-Community Perception

Initially, the local community perceived the field with skepticism, viewing it as a foreign or impractical concept. However, this perception

slowly shifts toward respect once the tangible benefits of mediation and conflict resolution are demonstrated.

Quotes: "I think they don't have enough knowledge or culture about this specialization. Most people, if not all of them, don't know that this specialization exists." (Graduate4)

"Society sometimes looks at it with surprise. I have a friend who always jokes with me, saying, Kochar Tribe and peacebuilding! Explain this unsolvable equation to me!" (Graduate10)

-Graduate Tangible Impact

Graduates are widely recognized as patient, thoughtful leaders who successfully shift institutional cultures towards dialogue, inclusivity, and strategic problem-solving.

Quotes: "The graduates of this department have begun to gradually shift the organizational culture towards greater transparency and dialogue." (Graduate6)

"There isn't a single person who studied this field who doesn't possess a distinctive quality in society... they leave their mark on the institution." (Graduate12)

THEME5: Future Outlook and recommendations

- Curricular Improvements

Recommendations heavily favored reducing theoretical overload in favor of practical, field-based training, incorporating international resolutions, and adding skill courses like facilitation and psychology.

Quotes: "Focus on Recent International Resolutions: I noticed a lack of emphasis on key UN Security Council resolutions, such as Resolution 1325 and Resolution 2250." (Graduate9)

"I suggest increasing the number of practical workshops and focusing more on our Iraqi community." (Graduate13)

-Field Recommendations

Graduates strongly recommended institutionalizing peace studies, such as mandating specialized mediators in legal courts, public schools, and government reconciliation committees.

Quotes: "It is essential that there be no reconciliation committee unless it includes someone specializing in peace studies and conflict resolution." (Graduate12)

"Each court should have a room called a mediation or peace room, where cases can be handled through negotiation." (Graduate13)

-Future Prospects





The future is viewed as highly promising due to the region's ongoing need for conflict resolution. However, success depends heavily on graduates proactively developing auxiliary skills like languages and digital proficiency rather than waiting for public sector appointments.

Quotes: "Develop your languages and digital skills, as they are very important. Even if government opportunities are not available, the private sector demands these skills." (Graduate2)

"The future is bright and promising if one develops oneself. Conflicts are increasing and, unfortunately, seem endless, which means a greater need for this specialization." (Graduate10)

3.2 GROUP COMPARISONS

BY Degree:

- High Diploma, Master, and PhD: Graduates in postgraduate programs were primarily motivated by immediate professional needs to formalize and deepen their existing work in conflict resolution, law, or public administration. They utilized their degrees for high-level policy interventions, complex mediation (e.g., ISIS families, corporate consulting), and accelerated career mobility.
- Bachelor: Undergraduate students often entered the program by chance (due to university placement systems or low grades) rather than specific interest. Despite this, they developed a deep passion for the field and mostly applied their skills in foundational community awareness, teaching children, and entry-level NGO roles.

BY Occupation:

- NGO sector: NGO professionals utilized the academic frameworks directly for project design, proposal writing, and field implementation (such as IDP integration and social cohesion). They highly valued courses on conflict mapping and facilitation but noted challenges with donor restrictions and short timelines.
- Teaching sector: Teachers applied peacebuilding skills to classroom management and student behavior, transforming rigid curricula into interactive lessons on human rights and tolerance. They faced challenges persuading traditional educational administrations of the subject's value.
- Public sector: Public servants (like judges and district governors) blended traditional legal and administrative authority with newfound mediation and active listening skills, allowing them to resolve deep-seated community and tribal disputes without resorting to punitive measures.

BY Ethnicity:



- Muslim: Muslim graduates frequently highlighted overcoming internalized regional, sectarian, and tribal biases. They emphasized moving away from traditional, sometimes coercive, tribal dispute resolution methods toward academic, neutral mediation.
- Minorities (Yazidi, Christian): Minority graduates heavily emphasized the theme of resilience and overcoming personal trauma. They applied their studies to bridge massive divides, such as facilitating dialogues with Sunni Arabs and families of ISIS members, and frequently engaged in high-level international human rights reporting (e.g., CEDAW, UPR).

BY Gender:

- Female: Female graduates frequently noted the personal empowerment the degree provided, giving them a voice within their marriages and families. They uniquely highlighted societal resistance to feminist terminology (like 'gender') and the challenge of advocating for women's rights in conservative areas.
- Male: Male graduates often focused on how the degree shifted their professional leadership styles, moving them away from aggressive, authoritative, or physically punitive management towards empathetic, patient, and analytical administrative approaches.

4.Results Analysis

This analysis locates the responses within the intersections of academic degree, professional goals, and the universal impact of the program that is Peace Studies.

1. Divergent Motivations Based on Academic Level Divergent motivations to engage in the peace studies program were identified depending on the academic level of the graduate. Those graduating with High Diplomas (graduate degree) viewed the program as a means to acquire knowledge and skills that would enhance their performance in their current careers or in a specific future job. No such career-advancement motivation for enrolling in the peace studies program was identified among the Bachelor's degree students. Their motivations for enrolling in the program were likely based on a general interest in peace studies or a desire to gain a foundational education in the field.

2. Universality of Personal Effect Across Ethnicities Although the stories, situations, and lessons for life were rooted in the experiences of Muslim, Yazidi, and Christian Middle Easterners, the findings indicate that these stories triggered similar cognitive shifts, newfound behaviors, and personal peace for people of various ethnic groups from around the world. This indicates that this program has universal appeal and is able to



affect people of various ethnic groups by bringing about similar changes to their tolerance and behaviors in regards to “the other.”

3. Graduate Employability into Key Social Sectors Graduates of University of Duhok, Peace Studies are also currently employed into other important social sectors vital for peace and security in the region. The data provided shows again a ‘spiky distribution’ with a majority of (6) employed in NGOs and (4) in teaching and educating future generations on peace issues.

4. The Gap Between Learning and Implementation Graduates believed that they had gained a lot of knowledge and skills, however within the thematic analysis this was labelled as ‘Implementation Challenges’. This was a point of friction for the graduates and highlights an area where current academic experiences do not adequately prepare students for the transition into public or NGO sector peace-building practice. This is an area where more practical training should be incorporated into the curriculum.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Institutional and Policy Recommendations

In order to ensure the long term sustainability of the Program, peace education needs to shift from an academic field of study to an established professional qualification within the structures of the KRG.

- Employment: Formalise 'Peace and Human Rights Specialist' as a recognised job category in the public sector employment framework and career progression policy, with coordination by the Ministry of Higher Education and the relevant education or employment ministry.

- Integrated Mediation Hubs: Establish “Peace Rooms” or Integrated Mediation Offices inside courts, governorate offices, etc. that are managed by specialists who graduated from this program to provide an alternative to punitive measures that encourages amicable resolution of tribal and civil disputes in an atmosphere and method suited for the parties involved.

- Enable Peace Studies graduates to be recognized and accredited by the Ministry of Education to lead the "Skills/Competencies" curriculum in junior high and senior high schools across Taiwan; this would enable the subject to be taught by specialists rather than general teachers without relevant background. The subject is taught by experts rather than generalist teachers.

5.2 Curricular and Pedagogical Enhancements

The curriculum should aim at bridging the gap between peacebuilding theories and practices, and the Iraqi context and reality.

- Operations: Psychosocial Integration- Given the history of trauma in the region, we would incorporate Trauma-Informed Peacebuilding into the curriculum as well as psychological facilitation techniques.

- Thematic Alignment: Adopt the UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 (Women, Peace, and Security) and 2250 (Youth, Peace, and Security) as two of the College's foundational themes, ensuring that our graduates are UN ready, specifically meeting the international NGO standards in this important area.

5.3 Practical and Professional Development

The proposed course must stress on practical knowledge delivery. The emphasis should be to make the graduating student's market ready.

- Mandatory Field Practicums: Shift from mandatory field practicums to required internships with local NGOs, INGOs, government related committees etc.

- Technical Skill Buffering: The study tried to enhance employability in the competitive NGO sector by incorporating "Soft Skill" modules into the program such as technical English, digital conflict mapping and professional grant proposal writing.

- Community Peace Clinics: University-based clinics where students would organize and facilitate community dialogue sessions, with the guidance of faculty, and provide a community service, while learning and growing in their skills.

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The Effects of Peace Studies Program A Qualitative Analysis of Graduates at the University of Duhok through Focus Group Selection



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