

Global updates

Foundation fellowships help train Iraqi women leaders

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The first three fellows of the Iraqi Women's Fellowship Foundation (IWFF) have just 'graduated', returning to Iraq in June this year. The foundation brings women in science and engineering from Iraq to study at US universities on a one-year fellowship.

The foundation, which is the brainchild of former World Bank employee Mary Oakes Smith, was launched a little over a year ago, with initial funding from the US State Department. The idea behind it is a simple one: to help Iraqi women working in science and engineering deepen their knowledge and leadership skills in order to help the rebuilding of their country. Though women in Iraq have traditionally occupied prominent economic and academic positions, this has changed in recent years. While women make up over half of Iraq's population, they currently represent only a third of the country's university students and less than a quarter of its workforce.



At present, Iraq lacks skills and leadership in the fields of engineering and science. Limited exposure to new technologies and research innovations, outdated curricula and equipment, and a lack of qualified teachers have combined to erode educational quality.

Each fellowship includes an English tutorial during the summer prior to the beginning of the September curriculum, which the host university provides. The first three fellows were at Berkeley (PhD in communications engineering), Stanford (PhD in power engineering) and UCSD (MSc in computer science) and undertook programmes specially designed for each of them.

One of the scholars is already under contract to the Iraqi government to develop plans to improve Iraq's internet security grid, while another is developing an interest in renewable energy research, particularly solar power. All will return to their teaching positions in Iraq. From the host universities, too, the response has been very positive. Though numbers in this first year were restricted because of visa issues, all are seeking Iraqi women scholars for the coming academic year and several additional universities have asked for scholars.

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For more information

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