

After years of isolation, colleges in Iraq are receiving lessons in leadership from counterparts in Britain, reports Carly Chynoweth

All school and college leaders face challenges but those in Iraq face more than most. Many work in buildings that have been destroyed or looted since Saddam Hussein's regime fell in 2003. Power cuts are a regular event and computer access is poor.

Although the political situation has become more stable, colleges still have to contend with the needs of students returning to education after being in prison, in the army or in exile, and with religious and tribal influences.

On top of these practical problems, academic staff have had few opportunities to enhance their own skills.

There is help, however, in the shape of the Rawabit Initiative, a UK-Iraqi collaboration that offers deans and other college chiefs the opportunity to learn from their peers in this country.

"They are welcomed into our institutions and they spend two weeks with us," said Ali Hadawi, vice-chairman of Rawabit and principal of Central Bedfordshire College.

"We don't lecture them about how they should set up systems in Iraq. Instead, we give them full access to all our internal dealings — our processes, systems and

ethos — so they can identify what would work for them and what wouldn't. Then they can identify what sort of help and support they might benefit from."

Much of this help has been on practical education issues — how to create the right IT and management systems and so forth — but there has also been demand for individual development.

"The whole concept of leadership was new," Hadawi said. "People just passed on decisions from above. When they came and saw how colleges operate here it broadened their horizons about what they could do as leaders."

"They realised they didn't have to spend their time authorising every packet of batteries — they could delegate some of that work and start thinking about strategy and the emotional and ambassadorial aspects of leadership."

Moneer Tolephih, dean of Baghdad Technical College, lists this as one of the three main challenges at his institution, after security (now largely resolved) and shortage of money.

"There is an expectation that the dean should manage all the activities inside the college, or at least share every small decision," he said. This leaves him little time to think about strategy.

Since completing a new quali-

fication this year, however, he is working to change this culture, coaching his leadership team to help them take responsibility for more decisions.

"My main challenge now is how to adapt the tools and techniques I learnt on the programme and to make sure that my leadership team is qualified to adopt them."

Tolephih was one of nine Iraqis

who took part in the deans' qualifying programme, training provided by Rawabit which is based on that undertaken by British principals.

Tony Nelson, who ran the British end of the programme, worked with Mahmood Abdullhussain, president of the Foundation for Technical Education in Iraq and a member of Rawabit, to develop the programme.

The first challenge was deciding how basic to make the course. "Until 2003 they had been cut off from much of the outside world academically, so things that we take for granted, such as access to international libraries, was almost non-existent," Nelson said. "We had to come in assuming nothing. We could not assume knowledge in terms of leadership."

What he did find was an enormous desire to learn — and he had some learning to do himself. For example, Nelson had to get to grips with teaching in a culture that places a high value on not losing face, as this made it hard to encourage people to speak up when they did not understand something.

He also came to realise that participants were protecting him from losing face, too — meaning that he could continue down a particular line of reasoning for some time before realising that he was off track.

"They came from an environment where you survive by not saying things that would get you in trouble... so we had to challenge them hard on things such as their need to make demands as a line manager," Nelson said.

"Nobody had ever asked for feedback from a subordinate, let alone their boss or a customer. So we had to encourage them to take small steps."



Security issues have largely been resolved at Iraq's colleges

Swap the AK47 for a shovel

In the past decade, England's further education colleges have worked hard to build links with businesses by, for example, offering courses that meet the needs of local employers. The students become more employable and the businesses get the skills they need.

This model has now been adapted for Iraq by a dean from a technical college in

Najaf who visited Greenwich Community College, in southeast London. The city had serious problems with factionalism and a high number of former soldiers with no work.

The dean's solution? To make sure that his college provided people with the skills they would need for productive work.

"He reasoned that Iraq then, and for at

least the next 15 years, needed to do a lot of building, so he created a construction industry training programme," said Ali Hadawi, vice-chairman of Rawabit.

"He then went to the American military base, met the local commander, showed him the programme and asked whether he would like to contribute.

"The Americans thought it was a great

idea because it was giving former fighters something productive to do so they provided a daily allowance for attendees and gave a tool kit to people when they graduated so they could go straight into work.

"That was three years ago, and it was so successful that it has been rolled out across the country."