

## **The Effects of Peace Education Program on University Students: Case Study of University of Zakho, Kurdistan Region, Iraq**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Peace education globally equips students with skills for harmony and conflict prevention using innovative methods, technology, and community initiatives, fostering intercultural understanding and sustainable peace. This study aims to evaluate HWPL's peace education program's impact on intercultural sensitivity, student attitudes, behaviours, and its implications for Iraqi university curricula. This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research to assess the impact of HWPL's 12 peace education lessons. The research spanned one semester (15 weeks) during the 2023–2024 academic year, with data analysed using SPSS. The study's findings revealed a statistically significant difference between pre-test and post-test results, favouring the post-test, indicating improved student understanding of peace education. The mean scores of the 12 lessons ranged from 1.93 to 2.26, with lesson 2, focused on appreciating diverse viewpoints, traditions, races, and affiliations to promote societal harmony, ranking highest at 2.26. The results positively impacted university students' perspectives towards peace education. Additionally, no statistically significant gender differences were found in average peace education scores. The researchers concluded with several recommendations and suggestions for future studies to explore this field further. Conclusion: The study showed that peace education significantly improved students' understanding of peace and diversity, supporting its expansion in universities, schools, and international collaborations.*

**Keywords:** Peace Education, HWPL, Kurdistan Region, Iraq.

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### **A. INTRODUCTION**

The integration of peace education into higher education is growing globally to equip students with the skills, values, and knowledge needed to foster harmony and prevent conflict (Purwanto et al., 2023). Institutions like the University of Granada apply innovative pedagogies such as problem-based learning, Freinet Pedagogy, and Emotional-Transpersonal Education to improve motivation, participation, attention, and self-awareness (Kárpava & Ramos, 2020). Methods promoting active participation and ethical, critical, and creative thinking are vital for supporting peace education and achieving sustainable development goals (Albert, 2019). Moreover, information and communication technologies enhance dialogue and collaboration, which are key to a culture of peace (Lopes & Cavazzani, 2025). Community-based initiatives

like Rwanda's MAP project use interdisciplinary, arts-based approaches to advance peace through cultural engagement and policy impact (Breed et al., 2024).

Peace education is adapted globally to meet local needs and challenges. In Poso, Indonesia, multicultural religious education promotes sustainable peace by encouraging collaboration among students of different faiths through shared classroom and social activities (Mashuri et al., 2024). The Peace through Health Initiative in Mali combines health interventions with conflict resolution training to improve public health and reduce violence (Sanders et al., 2024). In Uganda, early childhood education and parental involvement are key to nurturing peace values from a young age (Ntini & Omona, 2022). However, peace education faces challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic forced educators to rethink peace teaching via daily life experiences (Rico, 2021), and implementation gaps, like excluding communities from participatory programs, persist in Colombia's peace process (Bachmann, 2023).

In today's interconnected world, peace education is increasingly vital for promoting intercultural understanding and conflict resolution. As diverse cultural and ethnic groups interact more, equipping individuals with skills to navigate diversity peacefully becomes essential (Reardon et al., 2019). The University of Zakho, in Iraq's Kurdistan Region, marked by political instability and ethnic conflict, has adopted peace education as a tool for social transformation. Partnering with Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL), a global NGO founded in 2013, Zakho implemented a peace curriculum fostering coexistence and non-violence. Introduced in 2020 and formalised in 2021, this curriculum now reaches over 500 institutions in 170+ countries (HWPL, 2024), reflecting the belief that sustainable peace starts with grassroots education.

The HWPL peace education curriculum at the University of Zakho offers structured lessons on human coexistence, the roots of violence, peace and justice restoration, and the importance of gratitude, forgiveness, and ethical responsibility. These themes are especially relevant in Iraq, where youth face long-term effects of conflict on society and individuals. Employing a transformative learning approach, the curriculum prompts students to critically examine their values and behaviours, encouraging peaceful alternatives to social tensions. In post-conflict settings, peace is often absent, resulting in aggression, bullying, discrimination, and exclusion behaviours linked to trauma, frustration, or internalised hostility (Kim, 2024). This aligns with the frustration-aggression hypothesis, which connects aggression to unresolved grievances and systemic inequality (Etim & Ukpere, 2023; Hou & Xia, 2024). These issues harm student well-being, education quality, and national reconciliation.

Educational institutions must serve as academic centres and spaces that foster tolerance, empathy, and peace. A lack of peace among students disrupts classrooms and undermines education's transformative role in building equitable, cohesive societies. Unaddressed student aggression can normalise violence and reinforce harmful stereotypes tied to ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, or socioeconomic status. In Iraq, where youth form a large demographic, equipping students with peacebuilding skills is vital for national stability and sustainable development. This study evaluates the HWPL peace education program at the University of Zakho, focusing on students' intercultural sensitivity and conflict responses. It aims to understand how peace education influences attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours toward diversity, empathy, and non-violent conflict resolution. It informs program improvements and

policy across Iraq and other post-conflict areas.

This study emphasises the crucial role of supporting future educators as peacebuilders. Ajmal (2022) notes that teachers transmit peace values through instruction and daily interactions. Pre-service teacher training that integrates peace education, addressing racial discrimination, gender inequality, and intercultural conflict, prepares educators for diverse classrooms. Institutions like the University for Peace, Teachers College, Columbia University, and UNESCO-affiliated centres offer adaptable frameworks (Orders, 2024). The study's significance lies in informing peace education in post-conflict regions by providing empirical evidence from Kurdistan, an underexplored MENA area. It offers a replicable model for universities in fragile societies. As Martinez et al. (2022) highlight, fostering intercultural sensitivity is essential for education and long-term peace and coexistence in divided societies.

This study has three objectives: (1) to measure the effectiveness of HWPL's peace education program in enhancing intercultural sensitivity at the University of Zakho; (2) to identify shifts in students' attitudes and behaviours; and (3) to evaluate peace education's broader implications for university curricula in Iraq. Based on qualitative pre- and post-test reflections from 46 students, results show significant growth in understanding peace concepts like coexistence, empathy, social justice, sustainability, gender equality, and nonviolent communication. Students reported applying peace education through reconciliation, community engagement, and a stronger commitment to diversity and conflict resolution. The study highlights how structured peace education can transform student perspectives in post-conflict societies, offering a model adaptable to other conflict-affected or diverse universities, reinforcing education's role in cultivating peace-conscious citizens globally

## B. METHOD

This study employed a mixed-method research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively understand peace education's impact (Hamzehee et al., 2025). Conducted at the University of Zakho during the 2023–2024 academic year, the sample included 46 randomly selected undergraduate students from the Departments of General Psychology (first year), English Language (first year), and General Science (second year). This diverse group ensured balanced gender and academic backgrounds. The study spanned one academic semester (15 weeks), aligned with the Bologna Process, and involved weekly peace education classes based on HWPL's curriculum, featuring twelve core lessons. This design allowed for measuring both the tangible effects of the program and capturing students' lived experiences throughout the course.

This study used two primary data collection methods: pre- and post-intervention reflection surveys and structured questionnaires. Students wrote reflections on their views of peace before and after the 12-lesson peace education course, providing qualitative data on personal growth. The questionnaire included 12 items rated on a 3-point Likert scale, assessing students' agreement with peace values, lesson engagement, and gender differences. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Chi-square tests to explore gender-based differences. Qualitative reflections underwent thematic coding to identify attitude and behaviour changes. Data triangulation compared reflections with survey results to ensure validity, while lecturers reviewed anonymised reflections to verify authenticity. This mixed-method approach



enhanced the study's reliability and depth of understanding.

**Formulation of the Research Hypothesis:** Peace education lessons significantly improve university students' intercultural sensitivity, understanding of peace, and conflict resolution behaviours.

Table1. Peace Education Questionnaire

No	Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree
1	I understand the importance of respecting the diversity and harmony of creation as a principle for peace.			
2	I appreciate different viewpoints and traditions to promote and harmonize community peace.			
3	I contribute to building a more peaceful world.			
4	I work to reduce the root causes of human conflicts.			
5	I exercise the grace found in nature for the well-being of society and the world.			
6	I preserve the interests of others without discrimination.			
7	I sacrifice for the sake of achieving peace at personal and community level without compensation.			
8	I act with forgiveness to achieve well-being and peace.			
9	I respect the elderly and show compassion for the young.			
10	I preserve cultural heritage for future generations.			
11	I abide by international laws and conventions to spread peace.			
12	I have the individual courage to protect community peace.			

Table 2. Defining the 12 lessons of HWPL

Lesson1: Original State of All Creation	Diversity, natural harmony, coexistence
Lesson 2: A Reason for All Creation Living in Harmony	Mutual respect, empathy, collaboration
Lesson 3: What Broke Peace in the World of Humankind	Greed, disorder, role of love in peace
Lesson 4: The Restoration of Order and Relation in the Human World	Conflict resolution, reconciliation
Lesson 5: Being Grateful for Kindness and Grace	Gratitude, well-being, positivity
Lesson 6: Being Considerate of the Benefit of Others	Empathy, kindness, social peace
Lesson 7: A Sacrifice without Compensation	Selflessness, peace through giving
Lesson 8: Understanding and Forgiving Others	Forgiveness, emotional healing
Lesson 9: Respect for Elders,	Gratitude to elders and teachers
Lesson 10: Efforts towards Preservation of Heritage	Cultural legacy, peace as heritage
Lesson 11: Law-Abiding Spirit and Law of Peace	Rule of law, DPCW, peace framework
Lesson 12: Completion of Peace Humanity Has Long-awaited	Courage, commitment, becoming peace messengers protect and cherish life.

## C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are based on pre-test and post-test reflections from 46 students who participated in a Peace Education course. The findings reveal a significant shift in students' understanding, perception, and application of peace in personal and community life. Their voices highlight the course's transformative role across multiple dimensions. Before taking the course, many students expressed having little or no knowledge about peace education. For example, *Sherzad Hussein Omar* stated, "I had no information about the subject," while *Sara Yousif Mazishared*, "I had no information about the topic." *Jwan Nihad Abdullah* also wrote, "Before the peace education course, I did not know the topic." These responses reflect a general unfamiliarity with peace beyond surface-level concepts.

Others had a vague or narrow understanding of peace. *Waleed Ageed Hussein* noted, "I had heard of peace but did not fully understand it." *Aram Anas Salim* admitted, "I knew little about peace education. I started researching, but had limited knowledge." *Nasra Omer Ali* even shared, "I did not know much about peace and did not think it was relevant, as we focused mainly on our studies." Some students associate peace with passivity or limited behaviours without understanding its deeper societal implications. *Dlven Faraj Saadi* wrote, "I knew peace was not just between countries but also about respect in our community." *Payman Avdal Batal* explained, "I did not aim to make others happy." Similarly, *Soleen Saadi Ahmed* said, "I thought peace was

about accepting life and downs and not making mistakes.” These statements show that while some students recognised basic values, they lacked deeper insight.

However, post-course reflections demonstrate remarkable development. *Mohammed Khorsheed Salih* wrote, “Through Peace Education, I learned peace starts within and spreads to others. Inspired by teachings, I promoted peace in my village during Eid, leading to reconciliation.” This is a concrete example of how peace education translates into real-world impact. *Jwan Nihad Abdullah* said, “I was able to use this knowledge to create a report and video on how we can contribute to a more peaceful world by standing together and supporting each other.” Many students began to connect peace to coexistence, acceptance, and respect for diversity. *Kajin Azad Muslih* learned that “peace fosters success and happiness by eliminating differentiation and promoting cooperation.” *Nour Ihsan Yasin* noted, “Gratitude and kindness are crucial for reducing conflicts and fostering peace.” *Adar Abdulrahman Mohammed* emphasised that peace education “is about coexistence and acceptance, regardless of differences like religion, gender, or language.”

For *Rejeen Hussein Ibrahim*, the course was an eye-opener. She admitted, “I thought peace meant equality in religion, appearance, and nationality, but I still judged others.” After the course, she reflected, “True peace involves understanding and accepting people regardless of their background.” Similarly, *Nora Ahmad Yosef* wrote, “I thought interacting with people from different religions and traditions could lead to problems.” Later, she concluded, “We should prioritise others' needs and spread goodness and peace.” Others saw peace education as a way to shape children's character and future generations. *Shreen Mustafa Hasan* wrote, “Early lessons discussed how those around them shape children's behaviour.” *Hindreen Hussein Smoaded*, “Peace leads to happiness and success, starting with teaching children goodness and respect from an early age.” *Dilan Khether Mhamad Saeed* also believed, “Peace education should start early, as it is crucial for understanding and respecting diverse beliefs and ideas.”

Students also expressed a shift in perspective on social issues such as justice, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. *Esraa Sameer Najeb* learned that “schools in post-conflict areas face challenges with difficult history, and peace education combined with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can help.” *Waad Hassni Sleman* reflected, “I was not aware of the role of democratic principles in promoting peace.” *Sipan Hussein Jangiz* acknowledged, “I did not realise the significance of environmental sustainability in the context of peace.” *Darya Abdullah Omar* learned, “Gender equality ensures that everyone has equal opportunities and rights, which contributes to a more stable and peaceful society.” There were also lessons about nonviolence, empathy, and interpersonal responsibility. *Chinar Musa Haji* stated, “Nonviolent communication involves expressing feelings and needs without blame.” *Rahma Omar Sleman* added, “Participatory approaches involve engaging all community members in peace-building activities.” *Shahida Ahmed Tahir* concluded, “Education builds values, addresses conflicts, and fosters social responsibility.”

Finally, some students moved from scepticism to belief in peace-building through small actions. *Payman Avdal Batal* admitted, “I thought efforts like a smile or kind words were insignificant,” but then realised “even small acts of kindness can significantly impact others and spread peace.” *Dilveen Nizar Othman* reflected that “even small acts, like smiling, contribute to a more positive and peaceful community.” *Soleen Saadi Ahmed* learned, “Responding to



negativity with kindness and taking responsibility makes life better.

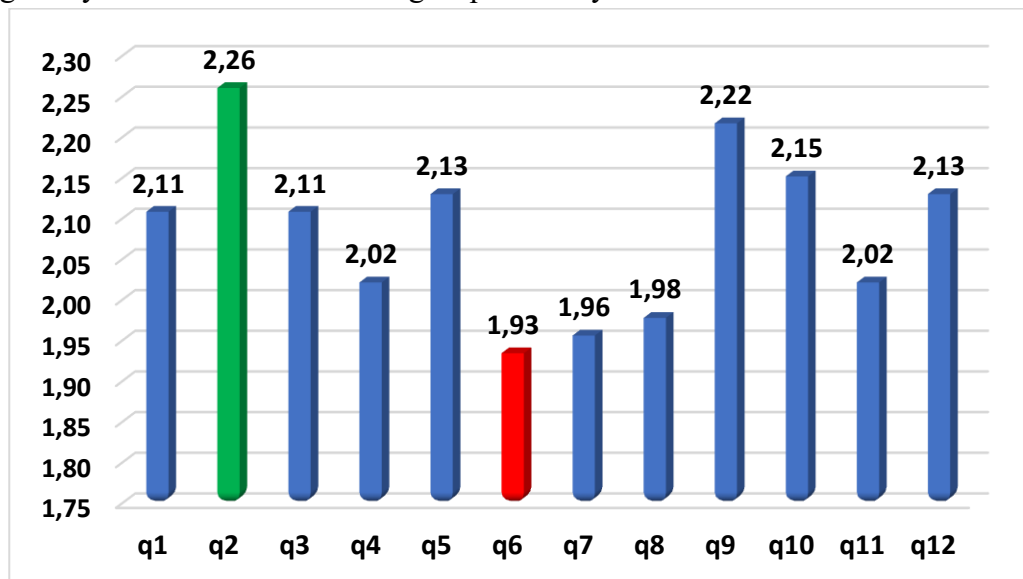


Figure 1. The lesson sequence and effectiveness from the students' point of view

Figure 1 shows that the mean of the lessons ranged between (1.93 - 2.26), where lesson (2) came in first place with an arithmetic mean of (2.26), which includes appreciating the viewpoints of others, their traditions, races and different affiliations to enhance and harmonize societal peace in order to spread love and peace among the peoples of the world. The researchers believe that the reason for this is respecting the opinions of others, despite the existence of different phenomena and traditions specific to each people, which has become an effective and active factor that contributes to societal peace and reflects a strong connection between the stability of societies and the individual and groups' sense of security, justice and equality on the one hand, and reducing chaos on the other hand. Explores the interconnectedness of all living beings and the environment. It delves into mutual respect and cooperation principles, illustrating how harmonious relationships contribute to a peaceful society. This lesson emphasises understanding and valuing different perspectives, cultures, and traditions. Students learn the importance of empathy, tolerance, and collaboration through interactive activities, discussions, and real-life examples. The lesson encourages them to apply these principles daily, fostering an environment where everyone can coexist peacefully and thrive.

Table 3. t-value of one-sample at the peace education subject in general

sample	Hypothetical mean	Arithmetic mean	Std. Deviation	T value		Significance Level & Degree freedom	Conclusion
				calculate	table		
46	24	25.02	2.28	3.03	1.68	0.05 (45)	significant

Table 3 presents the calculated T-value reached (3.03), greater than the tabular T-value (1.68). This means that there is a difference between the two means in favour of the arithmetic mean, meaning that this study's sample has a positive orientation towards sound upbringing. The researchers explained that a peaceful upbringing may contribute significantly to shaping the behaviour and attitudes of the students, which leads to positive results such as respecting moral

diversity and adhering to instructions and laws, in addition to respecting different traditions and cultures, and tolerance and appreciating the points of view of others. All of this contributed to building a healthy psychological personality in the students about a more peaceful and stable world.

Table 4: t-value of the independent samples test of peace education

Gender	N	Arithmetic mean	Std. Deviation	T value		Significance Leve& Degree freedom
				calculate	table	
Male	19	25.26	2.46	0.59	2.01	0.05 (44 )
Female	27	24.85	2.17			
total	46					

Table 4 reveals that the calculated T-value is less than the tabular value, which means there are no statistically significant differences between the average scores of peace education according to the gender variable. The researchers explain the reason for this by saying that those lectures on the peace education program were presented equally to both genders, which means that the educational institutions in the studied society follow a balanced approach in their peaceful education, such that there is no discrimination between them about educational values and principles, respect for others, and preserving the cultural heritage of society and the individual alike. To further support these results, Buheji (2024) affirmed the significance of peace education in cultivating a peaceful mindset among students, highlighting its contribution to behavioural transformation and sustainable societal peace. Similarly, Purwanto et al. (2023) emphasised that universities play a crucial role in institutionalising peace education through structured programs and centres, allowing students to engage critically and practically with peace-related concepts. These studies reinforce the present findings by confirming that structured peace education in higher institutions leads to positive shifts in student attitudes, perspectives, and capacities for peaceful coexistence.

## D. CONCLUSION

The current study examined the impact of a semester-long peace education course with 12 lessons, revealing significant positive shifts in students' understanding of peace, harmony, and diversity. Post-test results showed greater awareness of peace's role in fostering stability and preparing future generations for secure environments. Students highlighted the importance of learning from past conflicts and strongly desired to promote peace education in their careers. These findings align with Buheji (2024), who emphasised peace education's role in cultivating peaceful mindsets, and Purwanto et al. (2023), who advocated for institutionalising peace education centres in universities. John (2018) described peace education as a "counter force and restorative process," while Shehi et al. (2018) noted its deep integration in curricula and student experiences. Despite this, qualitative research on peace education remains limited. Universities are pivotal in developing peace agents (Oueljan, 2018), especially in post-conflict societies like Libya (Milton, 2020). Recommendations include expanding peace education across all university departments and introducing it in schools to reach wider audiences. Collaboration between governments and NGOs to host peace workshops is vital. International conferences and cross-cultural student programs can enhance global understanding. Future research should compare peace education impacts across colleges, examine its effectiveness in various schools, and explore gender differences in attitudes toward peace initiatives, deepening insights into program



development.

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## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1 : Conceptualizer, Research methodology design, Data collection through observation  
Author 2 : Data Collector, Report Writing  
Author 3 : Data Collector  
Author 4 : Research Methodology and Data Verification

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