

Building bridges between Lithuania and Iraq with Digital Explorers - Iraq Edition

The Lithuanian Government proactively initiated a dialogue with Iraq's Central Government and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) after evidence of irregular migration channels surfaced in 2021. While the primary and initial objective of this engagement was to address the instrumentalisation of migration, it also opened space to explore broader avenues of bilateral cooperation. Against this backdrop, the Digital Explorers – Iraq Edition project was developed.

Implemented by the think-and-do tank OSMOS and supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, the initiative sought **to create an enabling environment for collaboration between the two countries in the areas of digital talent development, mobility, and institutional knowledge exchange.**

Training that shapes career decisions



For Sarwan Shafeeq, the Digital Explorers journey proved truly transformative. While still studying for his bachelor's degree in Erbil, he completed the online courses at Turing College, undertook a remote internship with a Lithuania-based applied research centre, and connected with a fellow programme participant – now his business partner – Hastiar Sheikhani. Together, they are currently co-developing a start-up that provides market research services and have enrolled in a business accelerator.

Sarwan says participation in Digital Explorers was the deciding factor for him to build a career in data analysis.

Digital Explorers is a series of projects pioneering skills partnerships and other ways of cooperation between the ICT ecosystems of EU and partner countries. During the Iraq Edition of the project (2023-2025), 17 aspiring ICT professionals graduated from a six-month Data Analytics course which was delivered by the online tech school Turing College. In addition, the cohort had live get-togethers, meetings with companies, and career consultations, facilitated by the local project partner Five One Labs. The feedback survey showed that **the absolute majority of trainees (88,9%) felt that the training already had or will have a positive impact on their careers.**

University cooperation

Shortages in digital skills remain a key barrier to Iraq's digital transformation, and universities are seeking ways to align their curricula with the global ICT market demands. To this end, institutions such as the University of Kurdistan Hewlêr (UKH) are building international partnerships. Following a study visit to Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) in Kaunas, **actions are underway to bring UKH students for short-term trainings or semester exchanges at VMU** through the Erasmus+ programme. Academic collaboration is also on the table. According to Tomas Krilavičius, Dean of the Faculty of Informatics at VMU, universities in Iraq demonstrate a strong foundation in theoretical knowledge, noting that "*not so many people want to do fundamental research here in Europe.*"



Iraqi students in Kaunas: mission possible?

In late 2025, OSMOS launched a new Ministry of Foreign Affairs-backed project under the Digital Explorers series, aiming to bring eight Iraqi students to Lithuania to enrol in the Applied Informatics Master's programme at VMU. In addition to the formal curriculum, the programme will provide entrepreneurship training and tailored career support. The pilot initiative will test **the feasibility and conditions of a structured student migration pathway** from Iraq to Lithuania.



Roadmap for bilateral action

The OSMOS team organised multiple exchanges, including four field missions to Iraq and one visit to Lithuania. These activities not only helped build rapport between stakeholders but also enabled fruitful discussions on how the digital ecosystems of central Iraq, KRI, and Lithuania can benefit from one another. Based on this dialogue, the project team mapped out multiple pathways for Iraq and Lithuania (and the EU more broadly) to cooperate across areas such as youth digital skills development, institutional knowledge exchange on data governance, and tech entrepreneurship. Given the exploratory nature of the project, its long-term impact is highly dependent on sustained commitment on all sides to support more hands-on collaboration.

About the MPF

This grant project is part of the EU-funded Migration Partnership Facility (MPF), managed by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) to support the external dimension of the EU's migration policy. MPF funds projects that promote dialogue and cooperation on migration and mobility between EU Member States and partner countries outside the EU.



Funded by
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About the project

Run by Lithuania-based OSMOS Global Partnerships, the project Digital Explorers - Iraq Edition aimed to create an enabling environment for digital talent development and to build a strong skills enhancement and mobility partnership between Lithuania and Iraq.

About the evaluation

Testimonies used in this document were gathered as part of a final evaluation of Digital Explorers - Iraq Edition, conducted in 2025. The evaluation was led by Policy Impact Lab who makes part of a consortium of six consultancies and NGOs, namely Blomeyer & Sanz, Diversity Development Group, Migration Policy Group, Policy Impact Lab, Samuel Hall and Tandans.

