

Bleak but Not Hopeless: Higher Education in Lebanon in Times of Multiple Crises

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Abstract

The economic and political situation in Lebanon has been worsening since 2019, with wide-ranging repercussions on the society in general, as well as on the higher education system. Despite this, Lebanese universities have shown remarkable resilience, engaging in partnerships and programs that support their own institutional survival and developing initiatives to address economic challenges. Such resilience, however, should not be taken for granted and requires active support to be maintained.

Lebanon is going through “the most devastating, multipronged crisis in its modern history” (World Bank, November 2022). As of summer 2023, the Lebanese pound had lost 98 percent of its value, drastically diminishing the purchasing power of the population. The unemployment rate has increased dramatically, reaching almost 50 percent among young people aged between 15 and 24. With roots in the post-civil war economic policies of the 1990s, the crisis reached a tipping point in October 2019 with the introduction of a tax on messenger services that led to nationwide protests against the ruling class. Since then, the situation has worsened due to subsequent shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic, a global economic downturn, and the Beirut port blast in August 2020. Moreover, an ongoing political stalemate, with a vacant presidency since October 2022 and a caretaker government with limited power, is preventing economic recovery. The cumulative impact of these crises on Lebanese society is multifaceted and devastating, with an estimated 90 percent of the population currently living below the poverty line. The higher education and research sector has been severely affected as well, with students facing enormous access and affordability issues, research going unfunded, and a massive loss of wages. Institutions struggle to maintain daily operations and witness reduced teaching quality as a result of unprecedented brain drain.

Currency Depreciation Affects Staff, Students, and Institutions Alike

Academic and administrative staff at all universities in Lebanon have suffered substantial losses in their salaries due to a massive currency depreciation. While internationally-backed institutions such as the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University have, until now, managed to pay up to 30 percent of salaries in US dollars and the remainder in Lebanese pounds, salaries at financially weaker universities have plummeted. At the Lebanese University, the country's only public university, salaries are exclusively paid in Lebanese pounds, and the cutbacks have been most dramatic. As such, staff at various institutions compare their work with volunteering, with reports of massive delays in payments, and bargaining for unpaid additional work. As a result, up to 50 percent of the original staff have left their institutions to work abroad. The consequences for the quality of teaching and the research output are significant, and affect the country's struggling economy even more, as it is heavily relying on innovation and the development of human capital.

To counter declining budgets, private universities have increased their tuition fees, mostly requiring payment in a blended rate of US dollars and Lebanese pounds. With students and their families already in a state of economic stress, such increases have made it unaffordable for many of them to continue or even start studies. The overwhelming majority of students are forced to work alongside their studies. Even at the Lebanese University, where tuition fees are raised in Lebanese pounds and hence range between a seemingly affordable equivalent of USD 15 to 60 per year, many students have been forced to quit. The costs for transportation, internet, hardware, study materials, and even stationary pose additional accessibility challenges for students, not to mention the psychological stress and feelings of insecurity and hopelessness associated with the prolonged economic and political crisis.

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Lebanese Universities Perform Well and Try to Tackle Challenges

Despite all hardships, several Lebanese universities still seem to perform quite well in global rankings such as QS or *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings. In QS World 2024, for example, eight out of 30 Lebanese universities figure among the top 1,000 institutions worldwide, among them the American University of Beirut, the Lebanese University, Saint Joseph University, Holy Spirit University, Lebanese American University, and Beirut Arab University. Many institutions continue to be involved in international exchange and partnership programs, which allow them to stay connected and might offer opportunities to attract financial or material support for teaching and research.

In addition, academic institutions have demonstrated their ability to cope with the multiple crises that have unfolded in recent years and to respond to the economic challenges that the country faces. For example, several Lebanese universities have set up or expanded innovation centers to support entrepreneurial initiatives. Through trainings, bootcamps, competitions, and grants students are encouraged to implement their business ideas and to market their products and services. Such initiatives aim to slow brain drain and contribute to job creation inside the country. Other institutions have partnered with international enterprises such as the telecom giant Nokia or the French shipping company CMA CGM to provide scholarships, job opportunities, and support for start-ups.

Several universities are planning to establish branches in the region and benefit from their institution's and the country's educational reputation in an effort to tap into new markets and broaden their revenue base. Under the label "AUB Mediterraneo," the American University of Beirut has established a twin campus in the Cypriot city of Paphos, offering seven bachelor and master programs starting in fall 2023. A similar endeavor is undertaken by the University of Balamand with a focus on medical programs in partnership with the University of Lancashire Cyprus. The Lebanese American University plans to establish a branch campus—including a medical school and a hospital—in Baghdad, Iraq.

Notwithstanding the manifold constraints, Lebanese universities show remarkable resilience. In some cases, this might be due to strong international backing, including endowments in their countries of affiliation, such as the United States or France. But also, their decades-long experience with political and economic turmoil, their institutional autonomy and hence flexibility in adopting tailor-made solutions, as well as a

widespread spirit of inventiveness and innovation among management, staff and students help tackle the challenges.

Various Actors Launch Reform and Action Plans

In addition to these individual initiatives, the Lebanese ministry of education and higher education has launched a five-year plan aiming to reform the Lebanese higher education sector by strengthening key areas such as governance, quality assurance, and civic engagement. However, local experts have criticized the very generic nature of the plan, its lack of reference to the current crises, and poor involvement of practitioners in the drafting process. Hence, there is little hope that the plan will meaningfully contribute to tackling the enormous challenges that the higher education sector is facing. Other policy initiatives are striving to address these gaps, most notably HOPES-LEB, a project funded by the European Union. Compiled through participatory workshops and conferences, the initiative produced a comprehensive series of recommendations for universities, implementing organizations, the Lebanese government, and the international community on key areas such as funding, student support, teaching practices, and capacity-building.

It is obvious that the overall situation in Lebanon as well as within the higher education sector is still bleak. Structural challenges, such as limited political and state commitment, lack of effective education policy development, and inequalities in financing and access, remain. However, the resilience of the academic tradition in Lebanon, the strong reputation of its universities, excellent performance in international rankings and continuous creation of new initiatives prove that not all hope is lost. It is probably not a coincidence that the national emblem of Lebanon is the Phoenix, a symbol of rebirth and immortality. Assuming their traditional role as change agents, Lebanese universities act as key players in this renewal, and deserve the necessary national and international support. ▲

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