

**Higher Education in Lebanon
between Quality Requirements and Market Challenges**

Higher Education in Lebanon between Quality Requirements and Market Challenges

Father Michel Jalakh, oam

23rd Anniversary of the University
Feast of Our Lady of Seeds - May 15, 2019

Higher Education in Lebanon between Quality Requirements and Market Challenges

1. Service, Trade, and the In-Between

The 1990s marked the beginning of the “commodification of education,”¹ where education was perceived as a lucrative business. The expansion of the for-profit education phenomenon reversed many equations in the educational administration, the economy of education, and the values of the educational process as such. From that period on, Lebanon witnessed the emergence of a new model of market-oriented universities which helped meet the growing demand for higher education in Lebanon.² However, these models complicated the university landscape in Lebanon and led to a constraint in the development of the models and criteria in question at the national level.

I hasten to say that the pursuit of profit is not blameworthy, yet it deprives the educational institutions of vital controls to their functioning. In order to prevent profitability, new forms of control must be adopted. The focus should be on the quality and ethics of the educational work. The social responsibility has to be focused on, as well to ensure the provisions of Law 285, which considers higher education as “a public service provided by higher education institutions that responds to the need of society to

¹ See, for instance, Catherine NAFTI-MALHERBE and Mikael PALME (ed.), « La marchandisation de l'éducation », *Revue internationale de sociologie et de sciences sociales*, vol. 27. 1, December 2017; Nico HIRRT, « Les trois axes de la marchandisation scolaire », *Investig'Action*, 19 May 2001, <https://www.investigaction.net/fr/Les-trois-axes-de-la/> (accessed April 25, 2019); Martha C. NUSBAUM, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 2010.

² See Jacques KABBANJI, « Heurs et malheurs du système universitaire libanais à l'heure de l'homogénéisation et de la marchandisation de l'enseignement supérieur », *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, n. 131, June 2012, <https://journals.openedition.org/remmm/7651> (accessed April 25, 2019).

strengthen its capabilities and develop its potential”³.

Nevertheless, whether public or private, for-profit or not, the university is not a closed system that keeps all of its achievements for itself or pays alone for its mistakes. It is rather a socio-economic actor and a vector of values which is liable towards the society.

2. Higher Education in Lebanon against Conflicting Social Expectations

Such responsibility towards the community takes many forms in the Lebanese public opinion, some of which are rightful whereas others relate to exaggerated complaints against those who are in the forefront of the service delivery system, including universities.

The society expects from us to offer students, in a fair and non-discriminatory manner, a high-quality education which would open for them the doors of major universities or rewarding labor markets. In addition, it expects from us not to turn away any student or scholarship application. It further expects from us to achieve satisfactory results in regional and global classifications, while forgetting that the financial, logistic, and human cost of development is high. All these requirements work in parallel with the poor public investment which is forced to limit itself to a partial, indirect, or a poorly effective funding of the demand.⁴

The society wants us to educate young people on the values of citizenship, to bring up a generation of students capable of creating a

³ “General Provisions on Higher Education and the Regulation of Private Higher Education,” Law n.285 (Official Gazette of 8/5/2014), Article III: Objectives of Higher Education as a Public Service (in Arabic).

⁴ See, for instance, Thomas MELONIO, Mihoub MEZOUAGHI, *Le financement de l'enseignement supérieur en Méditerranée : Cas de l'Égypte, du Liban et de la Tunisie*, Agence française de développement 2010, <https://www.afd.fr/fr/le-financement-de-l-enseignement-superieur-en-mediterranee-cas-de-legypte-du-liban-et-de-la-tunisie> (accessed April 25, 2019).

movement similar to that of the 1960s and 1970s. It wants us to be able to solve the endemic problems of our Lebanese democracy and to organize elections with the precision of a Swiss watch, forgetting that the society is caught between appeals for electoral abstention and street polls, while differences of opinion constantly threaten to turn into violence.

The society also wants universities to plan for the country's economic future and to be able to forshadow the needs and professions that the Lebanese State or the private sector plan to promote, so as not to give their students useless diplomas that only qualify them to become "jobless". It also wishes to reserve for its citizens a place in the most overstaffed professions in Lebanon, such as medicine, pharmacy, civil engineering, and law. In reality, universities are not the economic planning authorities for the labor market and even if they knew the direction of tomorrow's labor market, they still lack the capacity to mobilize political will in the direction indicated by the planning process.

Eventually, there is nothing easier than running a higher education business in Lebanon when it is seen as an investment with profitability as the sole criterion. As a matter of fact, schools inject large numbers of students into universities, which means an increase in demand against poor quality controls; therefore, there is no real pressure on the universities.

At the same time, the task of higher education in Lebanon is not as easy as it seems when we consider its mission and its role. In fact, it cannot be submitted only according to the criteria of the offer and demand, because this would require an almost impossible reconciliation between social responsibility and human sense considerations, on the one hand, and the requirements of asceticism and sustainability, on the other hand; between renouncing profit, on the one hand, and the need to spend lavishly to attract funding that universities cannot obtain otherwise, neither from their students nor from the State, on the other hand. Undoubtedly, they have to plan on their own, because of the absence of an inclusive national initiative that would reflect in a strategic and cross-sectoral manner on the means to establish productive and innovation-sensitive integration between

universities and the labor market, between the private and public higher education, and between the various private institutions of higher education.

3. Higher Education in Lebanon: Strengths and Challenges

There is no doubt that education in general, and higher education in particular, constitute an advanced sector in Lebanon with a good reputation in the region and beyond, despite the fake diplomas scandals that broke out recently. Lebanese higher education institutions, in the modern sense of the term, were the pioneer in the Arab world since the middle of the 19th century, due to the presence of Christian missionaries, namely the American University of Beirut (AUB) and Saint Joseph University (USJ). This sector has proved, through its various components, its great efficiency and dynamism, as a large elite of the Arab world and its skilled workforce pursued their studies in its institutions which continue to occupy acceptable positions in international rankings, given their limited resources.

As stated by the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, the higher education sector is one of the “reasons behind the magical mix that makes Lebanon [...] a source of excellence, creativity, initiative, and success in the region and the world.”⁵ However, our pride in this sector and its achievements should not prevent us from thinking about its weaknesses, which are deeply-rooted vulnerabilities some of which are structural and some others are operational, but which altogether slow down its progress towards more competitiveness and innovation. These transformations result from rapid changes in the fields of science, technology, demography, economy, business, among others, coupled with the slow formalities and improvements in the related public departments.

We must begin by reading these challenges in their regional dimension, that is, the joint dimension between Lebanon and the neighboring

⁵ Introduction of Saad Hariri, in Hatem ALAMI, *The Future of Higher Education in Lebanon: Between the Public Order and the Transitions of a New Era*, Publications of the Modern University of Management and Sciences, Beirut 2019, p. 10 (in Arabic).

countries. In this context, most of the studies on the status of higher education in the Arab world reached the following conclusions:

- The urgent need to establish new educational institutions in most Arab countries, with a few exceptions, including Lebanon;
- The problem of the unbalanced distribution of students between university education and higher technical education, coupled with an imbalance in the proportion of undergraduate and graduate students;
- The distribution of students between the fields of specialization, with a large concentration in the fields of literature, social sciences, law, and business administration, and the need for more graduates in the fields of education and basic and applied sciences;
- Inadequate harmonization between the outputs of higher education and the labor market, “where higher education institutions produce a large number of graduates with no real employment prospects, while domestic labor markets lack graduates in many specialties that are not provided by the higher education institutions;”⁶
- The scarce production of science, technology and innovation (the number of published scientific articles, patents deposited and obtained, the extent of contribution to the development of the industry, etc.),⁷ makes it difficult for the Arab university system to contribute towards the inclusive and sustainable development of its societies, and makes the “knowledge economy,” which most of the countries in the region claim they are seeking to build, a mere

⁶ Ramzi SALAMEH, “The Reality of Higher Education in the Arab Countries,” in Henri AWIT (ed.), *Innovation or Exhaustion. The Arab Scientific Research: Its Reality, Challenges, and Perspectives 2017-2018*, The Arab Thought Foundation, p. 152 (in Arabic).

⁷ See World Bank’s Report: *Transforming Arab Economies: Traveling the Knowledge and Innovation Road*, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, Washington DC 2013, p. 69.

slogan.⁸

These challenges are key to framing some of the pitfalls of our higher education in Lebanon. They can even be seen as opportunities for us if we know how to develop in a way that meets the needs of the region, how to link what we offer locally to its needs, and how to leverage the successful experiences of other countries with whom we share the same problems and concerns.

What conclusions can be derived from reading the reality of Lebanese higher education, in the light of its counterpart in the Arab world?

Unlike many countries in the region, Lebanon has a surplus rather than a shortage of higher education institutions, due mainly to the proliferation of licenses during the post-war period, which has led to a quantitative boom that did not take into account quality considerations nor the requirements of complementarity between the different institutions. The main result, according to the specialists in higher education, was a drop in quality and the dominance of an atmosphere of fierce, uncontrolled and non-constructive competition between the various institutions.

The need in Lebanon is qualitative rather than quantitative. Hence, the McKinsey report's recommendation, for example, to address capacity constraint in top universities, since saturation is only apparent. In fact, attempting to solve the problem of access to university education without adequate planning and an actual monitoring of quality and market needs does not solve the problem of educational opportunities but relatively create serious and profound problems related to the quality and reputation of education.⁹

⁸ See Omar AL-BIZRI, "Arab Scientific Research: Its Institutions... Resources, and Outcomes," in *Innovation or Exhaustion, op. cit.*, pp. 29-136 (in Arabic).

⁹ See UNESCO's Regional Report: *A Decade of Higher Education in the Arab States: Achievements & Challenges*, UNESCO-Beirut, July 2009, http://unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/Beirut/pdf/Regional_Report_on_Higher_

It is not surprising, therefore, that the section on the “Problems of higher education” goes as it is, from year to year, in the annual report of the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), in the absence of a concrete plan to address these issues. Thus, the successive reports acknowledge the existence of substantive problems in terms of quality and productivity, which they attribute in part to the archaic licensing criteria or the non-application of the newly issued ones, while emphasizing a number of aspects of the crisis, which are most notably and with the sole exception of the Lebanese University:

- The reduced areas and opportunities for social interaction among the students and the faculty members;
- The poor contribution of the Lebanese higher education to the demographical mobility;
- The weak contribution of higher education, especially the one offered by the Lebanese University, to social progress;
- The plethora of severe crises related to the labor market available to university graduates;
- A real difficulty, shared by the higher education system with the vocational and technical education, in keeping pace with the developments in the global labor market, and in building a competitive workforce.¹⁰

There is no doubt that the approach adopted by the CDR experts is focused on the outputs of higher education in terms of its alignment with the labor market and its contribution to social mobility. Therefore, we do not see it directly paying attention to other elements, which may be the root of the problems it refers to. Yet, it slightly interferes with the diagnosis of the

Education_in_the_Arab_States.pdf (accessed April 25, 2019).

¹⁰ See the progress reports on the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) website between 2010 and 2018.

following most pressing issues by experts of the higher education system in Lebanon, according to the survey conducted under the Erasmus + project in 2017:

- Employability of graduates;
- Absence of quality assurance;
- Weakness of research structures and funds.¹¹

What is the shape and the degree of urgency of these challenges? How can these facts be placed on the agenda of decision-makers?

4. The Labor Market in the Absence of Indicators

The assessment of the university offer's alignment to the labor market requirements is usually based on the examination of a number of facts, in particular:

- The ease of graduates' access to the labor market;
- The correlation between the work performed by the graduate and his/her academic background;
- The degree of satisfaction of the graduate with respect to his/her career development;
- Unemployment rates, disguised unemployment, and employment of graduates in jobs that do not require the level of skills they have acquired;
- The labor world's perception of the graduates' skills.¹²

¹¹ See the introductory paper for the Round Table organized in November 2017 under the title: *Rethinking Lebanese Higher Education*, <http://erasmusplus-lebanon.org/event/1967> (accessed April 25, 2019).

¹² See Ramzi SALAMEH, "The Reality of Higher Education in the Arab Countries," *op. cit.*, p. 148.

But what about this alignment in Lebanon?

According to a widely held idea, Lebanon produces more graduates than its needs. However, an analysis of the figures and their comparison with international standards show that the ratio of graduates to the population is still below what is needed to respond to the development needs of the community and to tackle the needs of everyday business. As a matter of fact, our university graduates account for 7.4 per 1 000 inhabitants per year, while in industrialized countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and France, there are 12 graduates per 1 000 inhabitants.

However, 30% of our unemployed people are university degree holders.¹³ Nevertheless, while holding a degree increases employment prospects in developed countries, the situation seems to be different in a large number of developing countries, especially in the Mediterranean ones, where in some cases it appears that people with no university degree are less likely to be unemployed than others. This raises the question of alignment between higher education and the labor market needs, and even a deeper question about the economic and development health of these countries. Indeed, higher education outputs can be in line with what these countries actually need, in the context of progress and development, but unless political will and economic planning are not mobilized to turn these needs into an effective demand for skilled labor, universities will not be able to change things. However, in the 21st century, it is inconceivable that a society denies its citizens' access to higher education and related social progress opportunities, simply because the state to which it belongs failed to build an economy that values ambition. It is therefore wrong to consider the high unemployment rate among graduates as an indicator of the universities failure to meet the needs of the market. It would be more correct to tackle the problem as a symptom of a deeper and more comprehensive

¹³ See Najib ISSA, « Les diplômés de l'enseignement supérieur au Liban et le marché du travail », in Elisabeth LONGUENESSE (ed.), *Formation, qualification, métiers. Évolution du marché de l'emploi et information sur les métiers*, Presses de l'Ifpo, Beirut 2014, pp. 39-40.

economic crisis¹⁴ which is signaled by the inability of our economy to grow at rates that enable the creation of adequate levels of job opportunities and by the imbalance between the public and private sectors in terms of job security and social benefits. These factors increase the attractiveness of public employment already inflated and worn out by politically-motivated employment and contribute to disguised unemployment. In addition, nearly 93% of the private sector which are mainly composed of small and medium enterprises, and largely family-owned, do not have more than 10 employees.¹⁵

In this context, one cannot disregard the lack of transparency in our labor market, the absence of a detailed classification of skills and jobs, and the lack of supply-demand intermediaries. These elements make it difficult to obtain accurate indicators of the availability of jobs in the near future. It is not surprising, in the current state of things, that personal relationships are replacing the scientific assessment of skills and abilities, thus leading to a suboptimal distribution of human resources.

To this, one should add the problem of clientelism, which is not limited to public institutions, where discretionary employment confers a false value to certain degrees. In the private sector, as well, things do not seem easy, as they are subject to considerations of social relations rather than to the merit criterion.¹⁶ Therefore, in their quest for a job, graduates find themselves facing one of the following options:

¹⁴ See Jean-Claude BERTHÉLEMY, Sébastien DESSUS, and Charbel NAHAS, *Exploring Lebanon's Growth Prospects*, Policy Research Working Paper 4332, The World Bank, Washington DC 2007, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/7316> (accessed April 25, 2019).

¹⁵ See Jad CHAABANI *et al.*, *Higher Education & Labor Market Outcomes in Lebanon*, Hariri Foundation, AUB, and UNDP, Beirut 2009.

¹⁶ See Kamal ABOUCHEDID, Ramzi Naim NASSER, "Job-Seeking Behaviour and Job Outcomes among Lebanese University Graduates in Private and Public Universities," *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, vol. 6, Beirut 2006, pp. 167-180.

- Requesting political and/or confessional mediation to join the public sector;
- Looking for work in family-owned businesses, which constitute 85% of the Lebanese companies, and accepting that the prospects for promotion and networking are very limited;
- Looking for a job in international companies operating in Lebanon;
- Migrating.¹⁷

Given that the first two options do not satisfy the aspirations of young people and since the competition to join global companies operating locally is very fierce, the last alternative appears as the best possible option for graduates looking for a professional career that corresponds to their dreams and matches their abilities.

Migration in this context may seem inevitable to correct the imbalance between the “production” of skills and the inability to benefit from them, especially since they have provided our economy with vital revenues over the course of history. However, it must be recognized that the intensity of this phenomenon makes it a real economic and social threat, since it exacerbates labor market imbalances by draining the qualified labor force, contributing to the decline in productivity, and delaying the chances of economic transformation.

The emphasis put on the economic reasons of unemployment does not mean that universities are not liable or accountable for this situation. On the contrary, there is almost unanimous agreement that the rapid and chaotic inflation experienced by private higher education focused on profit has contributed to the loss of value of university degrees, at the knowledge and professional levels alike.¹⁸ There is also no doubt that the flaw

¹⁷ See *Higher Education & Labor Market Outcomes in Lebanon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

¹⁸ See Maïssam NIMER, *La construction des inégalités sociales dans le système éducatif au Liban : étude de cas d'un groupe de boursiers dans une université d'élite*, University of Paris-Saclay

distribution of students between the various disciplines has an important impact on this level. In fact, Lebanon, like some countries in the region with similar social and economic characteristics, is marked by an uneven and inefficient distribution of students among the different specialties. This problem is reflected in the continued high demand for the medical, engineering, and pharmacy disciplines, despite the decrease of the demand for Lebanese manpower in the Gulf markets. In addition, the enrollment rates in applied sciences are low in comparison with other disciplines such as social sciences, business administration, and law, where it will be long before students can find a job. This leads to having the lowest correlation between the type of job and the field of study.

However, the solution does not lie in the hands of the universities, although they have a role to play in this respect. Economic reforms are needed to produce real and sustainable growth, thus creating more quality jobs and reducing brain drain. Indeed, studies show that the number of new jobs offered each year in Lebanon, as well as the types of such jobs and their corresponding salaries, fall below the level of expectations of the Lebanese youth, and in a good number of cases make their parents' investment in their higher education a financial loss. Consequently, and given the high cost of living locally, and the attractive job conditions and social benefits offered by companies operating abroad, large segments of skilled youth do not find it logical to resist the migration call.

What is needed is an economy that is capable of employing qualified and ambitious young people. What is also needed is a national human resources observatory to identify sectors that will require more manpower in the coming years.

Most universities, like the Antonine University, have established placement and career development offices, which seek to link education with professional skills and mediate between graduate students and

2016, https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01496404/file/75464_NIMER_2016_archivage.pdf (accessed April 25, 2019).

businesses, in an attempt to compensate, even if partially, the weak chain of mediation in the labor market. We will soon be working on the establishment of faculty advisory councils, which will bring professionals and experts from the labor world together with the academic body to contribute to the development of the curricula, explore major trends in the labor market locally and globally, and identify possible areas of growth.

Universities do not have the luxury of being indifferent to the professional future of their graduates, because the trust of their labor market in them is one of the key indicators of the quality of education they offer. This brings me to another fundamental issue, which is at the forefront of the challenges of higher education in Lebanon, the region and the world: the issue of quality.

5. The Quality Assurance of the University Offer

With respect to higher education, the Lebanese State has always pursued a policy of minimal intervention in respect of the principle of freedom of education guaranteed by the Constitution, and since the State itself is younger than the sector in question. This policy is evidenced by the delay in publication of the first law on higher education until 1961, then by the late enactment in 2014 of the amendment to this formal law form, which came in less than two pages.

The impact of this policy, especially in the post-civil war era, has been that some private academic institutions were solely driven by commercial competition, without regard to quality and efficiency requirements.¹⁹ Thus, efforts were undertaken to develop a new law that would take into account the significant changes in the field of higher education in general and in Lebanon in particular since the promulgation of the first law.

The Law 285 had been issued in 2014, and like many others, we have

¹⁹ See Ali Moussaoui, "The Higher Education in Lebanon: The Challenges of Quality and the Development of the Private Sector," in Adnane EL AMINE (ed.), *Quality Issues in Higher Education in the Arab Countries*, Beirut 2014, pp. 707-727 (in Arabic).

several reserves about it. One must recognize though that it has established a number of controls and standards which, if implemented and protected from political discretion, the give-and-take logic and corruption, can rectify some aspects of the chaotic situation generated by the two decades preceding its publication. The councils and committees entrusted by law to study the files, programs and branches of the institutions are an essential step towards the right direction. The same goes for the idea of establishing the National Commission for Quality Assurance stipulated in the Article 37, which is not yet implemented.

Establishing a culture of quality and evaluation is one of the main challenges to higher education in the Arab world.²⁰ Many neighboring countries have preceded us in establishing national councils and bodies for accreditation and quality assurance. Therefore, there is a need to network and lobby in order to speed up the adoption of the law establishing the relevant body, and to ensure that the highest standards of quality are respected in its composition.

In the meantime, and in the absence of both an adequate and dissuasive legal framework, ensuring the quality of higher education in Lebanon remains dependent on the institutions themselves, which head for establishing quality assurance units and making use of foreign agencies to obtain an institutional accreditation or programs' accreditations intended to ensure the quality of the service they provide and their compliance with international standards, and to ensure that their degrees are eligible to cross the borders. This is what the Antonine University sought to achieve when it was awarded an institutional accreditation from the Swiss Agency of Accreditation and Quality Assurance (AAQ) in 2017, and an accreditation from the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) in 2018 for the concerned department. Preparations are currently underway to earn a program accreditation for the Faculty of Music and Musicology, and the Faculty of Engineering.

²⁰ See UNESCO's Regional Report, *op. cit.*

Accreditation is both an opportunity and a trap: it is the indicator of an acceptable level of objectivity and comparability with the level of performance of the academic institution in one or the other of its fields of activity. It is also a necessity to be able to sort the good universities from the bad ones, and to ensure that the reputation of good institutions is not tarnished by the ill-reputed. However, it tends to stereotype education and to obliterate innovative attempts thereto by importing control models and systems that put universities in the same basket and strip them of their appeal and their local authenticity.

In fact, the issue of quality can be addressed from two angles: the first is linked to the economic consideration which implies the dissemination of the most productive and less expensive paradigms, while the second is of a cultural nature and sees the wealth of higher education in a perspective of pluralism and diversity. The first emphasizes the utilitarian function of higher education, and is inspired by the logic of neoliberal policies, while the second views higher education as a lever for globalization that arises systematically from and respects diversity and pluralism.²¹ “Despite great similarities between systems and their institutions around the world, there has never been a single conception of the university. On the contrary, the numerous and diversified key academic traditions still maintain themselves at the national and regional levels.”²² Hence the differences between the American, British, French, and German systems. As for the populations who have lost touch with their past, they are looking like us for a global reference to connect with.

²¹ See Sophie MORIN, *Internationalisation de l'éducation supérieure et formation à distance : le pouvoir d'influence des États occidentaux*, Laboratoire d'étude sur les politiques publiques et la mondialisation, Québec 2007, http://cerberus.enap.ca/LEPPM/docs/Cahier%20recherche/Cahier_education_WEB.pdf (accessed April 25, 2019).

²² Imanol ORDORIKA, *S'engager au service de la société: les défis actuels pour les universités publiques de recherche*, UNESCO 2006, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275650535_S'engager_au_service_de_la_societe_les_defis_actuels_pour_les_universites_publiques_de_recherche (accessed April 25, 2019).

One of the advantages of this globalization may be that it reduces the affiliation of the Lebanese universities to confessional authorities, which it is sometimes rightly and some other times wrongly accused of, but the threat of stereotyping these universities and sweeping away their specificities is significant. In this globalization that preaches standardization which leaves no room for pluralism in the higher education, we must be mindful that the concept of quality can eventually become counterproductive in terms of contextual development and innovation. It can achieve what the law on higher education has inadvertently initiated, i.e. reducing the role of the university as a public space, a social actor, and a cultural and sectarian melting pot.²³

Foreign agencies may partially compensate universities in Lebanon for the absence of a national quality assurance committee, but they do not exclude the need for a local, efficient, and fair interlocutor. This interlocutor is not to be confused with the well-off or creditworthy student, as required by the market-oriented university model, nor does this relate to local advertising, where standards are mixed up, which may cause institutions to give precedence to factitious quality over authentic quality. Universities need an interlocutor for whom higher education is a priority, and who would be aware of the major trends that shape their future at different levels, while focusing at the same time on social, economic, and cultural local realities. They need an interlocutor who shall not be a commercial competitor, but a loyal sponsor whose impartiality is not tantamount to allowing fierce competition stifle them, but is rather reflected in his positive and unbiased contribution to critical thinking and development.

It may be naive to claim such an interlocutor, but this seems to be a necessity if we wish the discourse on quality in higher education to become a tangible reality and a sustainable culture, and to contribute not only to

²³ See, for instance, the interview of Alaa Mrouweh with Adnan El Amine, "Adnan El Amine's Comments on the Higher Education Law in Lebanon: Non-Participation, Non-Mingling, Non-Interaction and Discretionary Grant of Licenses," Beirut 2014 (in Arabic), www.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=741 (accessed April 25, 2019).

the production of knowledge, but to the establishment of a knowledge economy as well. And that brings me to the third challenge: the scientific research.

6. Scientific Research: A Civilizational Challenge

“Innovation or exhaustion”. This was the title chosen by the Arab Thought Foundation for its 10th *Arab Cultural Development Report 2017-2018*. In my view, this title can serve as an introduction, or even a summary, to the problem in question. In the past, this choice was a sword over the heads of higher education teachers alone, especially in Anglo-Saxon systems, where the rule of the game is simple: “Publish or Perish”. It has become in our modern days a recipe for the survival of populations and civilizations. It is still as fateful as a sword of Damocles, but at the same time it constitutes an opportunity for all people of the earth to participate actively in designing the future, by contributing to the production of knowledge and the development of technologies.

Despite this, the contribution of the Arab region to the production of knowledge remains low, although several prestigious and impactful initiatives, particularly in countries with significant financial resources. Nevertheless, these initiatives are, firstly, inadequate in numbers; secondly, mostly linked to foreign human resources; and, thirdly, their relations with the production sectors are insufficiently institutionalized and effective.

In spite of their importance, these initiatives shall remain isolated, unless they are accompanied, in their development and implementation phases, by a comprehensive educational reform plan that would ensure that education in our region is focusing, since its very first cycles, on competency building in the areas of research, critical thinking, and creative thinking, and for the development of high-quality doctoral programs in our region capable of providing higher education and the economy with the necessary human resources to advance scientific research.

In Lebanon, the Law on the “General Provisions on Higher Education

and the Regulation of Private Higher Education” requires, in its Article 5, higher education institutions to allocate at least 5% of their annual operating budget to scientific research and its needs. This is an additional step forward to encourage universities not only to transfer knowledge, but also to seriously engage in its critique and production.

However, this percentage is not enough to position Lebanon on the map of active countries in terms of research. In fact, the discourse on the need to develop scientific research comes up against the complaint of inadequate funding, as most Lebanese universities rely on tuition fees as a main source of income. They are not linked to external funding agencies, which places the need for diversification of funding sources as a common strategic priority, knowing that the State can contribute to solving this problem in part by working to get the universities closer to the industry, so that the latter funds the research and development stream that it needs within the university labs, thus achieving the deliverable that would have cost a lot if it had done it by itself, on the one hand, and helping academic institutions to develop their research capabilities and contribute to the development of their societies. But is this solution sufficient to address the shortcomings that universities have to face in a small country like Lebanon? And if this is so, will the officials in our country keep their promise and promote the industry and the productive sectors in general?

7. What About the Antonine University?

The contribution of the Antonine University is to shed light on this national dilemma that affects universities and society alike.

As for its orientation, our University’s mission highlights its specialization in contextualized research, that is to say research which is related to the civilizational context. To this end, the Center for Research on Musical Traditions (CRTM), for instance, studies oriental musical traditions, which earned it a privileged place on the international scene in this field. The Center for Euro-Mediterranean Art and Communication Research (CREMAC) delves into cultural interaction and the problems

of communication among civilizations, especially in the Mediterranean region. In doing so, the Antonine University contributes to the enrichment of human and social sciences, which are a low-production sector in Lebanon despite its oversaturation in terms of student enrollment, with world-class studies. The Faculty of Engineering is no exception to the Antonine University's desire to put its research efforts at the service of its local community. In this context, the Smart Beirut Summit (SBS) and the Conference on Telemedicine were recently held. In the context of the promotion of scientific research, the Vice-Rectorate for Integral Human Development has also launched, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, an interuniversity workshop on the development of an integrated wellness and mental health strategy in higher education institutions.

All these initiatives demonstrate that we are developing research in our university, while keeping an eye on the latest developments in the various sectors across the world and an eye on the Lebanese reality and its needs. In this context, it is worth recalling the ongoing partnership between the Antonine University and the National Council for Scientific Research (CNRS-L) for the co-financing of research projects which have totaled, for the first time, nine projects this year, as this partnership exemplifies the cooperation between the state and universities in the service of scientific research.

Conclusion

Between quality requirements and the meanderings of the market, higher education in Lebanon needs a courageous and ambitious plan. A courageous one that will radically and resolutely reconsider the innumerable cases of intrigues and marquetry that have accumulated over time in this sector; and an ambitious one that would aim for the highest degree of innovation possible.

In this context, the McKinsey recovery plan for the Lebanese State could be a valuable opportunity. The report identifies six sectors that are deemed to be catalysts for the desired economic growth, namely agriculture, industry,

tourism, financial services, the diaspora, and the knowledge economy.

In the latter sector, it sets a clear goal of building a “knowledge-intensive and digital national, at the forefront of innovation, acting as a talent hub for technology, creative industries and education.”²⁴ McKinsey experts recommend 28 initiatives to achieve this goal, including but not limited to increasing the capacity of top universities in Lebanon, promoting technology and innovation in higher education, ensuring the transparency of the labor market in terms of the supply and demand dynamics, etc.

Sustainable growth can only be achieved by investing in knowledge, and the knowledge economy can only be built through a qualitative support of higher education, which in Lebanon has a glorious past. Although its image has been somewhat tarnished by a number of accusations – some of which is right – it deserves that we join efforts to rectify it. However, higher education can contribute effectively to getting Lebanon out of the dark tunnel and building a future worthy of its skilled citizens, provided it is offered the necessary resources and is protected against blind commodification.

²⁴ See the Report on the Ministry of Economy and Trade’s website, <https://www.economy.gov.lb/media/11893/20181022-1228full-report-en.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2019).

