
The Bottom of the Abyss? Reflections on the Crisis of Higher Education in Lebanon

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I. Little History of the Big Decline

Seen as the first Arab country to have acquired modern higher education, Lebanon served as a leading higher education hub in the Middle East for a long period of time, thanks to the relatively long-standing religious Christian missions. In fact, two of our universities are older than the State of Greater Lebanon itself (proclaimed in 1920) and the independence of the country (declared in 1943), namely the “Evangelical” *American University of Beirut* and the “Catholic” *Université Saint Joseph* whose rector is attending this conference. Together with the Lebanese University, the only public higher education institution, and a few other sister universities that can be counted on the fingers of one hand, they shaped the pre-war Lebanon, notably through the formation of its professional, social and political elites. They actively contributed to women’s education and to the construction of a modern society characterized by meritocratic ideals, thus providing a social and intellectual foundation for the young State.

1.1. Civil War (1975 – 1990)

During the war (1975 – 1990), the higher education sector has been characterized by two key measures, namely the decentralization that took place through the establishment of regional campuses intended to respond to the territorial and demographic dismantling of the country, in addition to the suspension of several doctoral programs whose quality and credibility were threatened.

1.2. Lebanon’s Second Republic (1990 –)

The civil war officially ended in 1990, and then under the impetus of the neo-liberal policies established by the successive governments, the number of

higher education institutions exploded, with 50 universities in 2020 and more than 100 campuses spread over an area of almost 10,000 square kilometers (far less than half of the island of Sicily). Among the newcomers, there were undoubtedly "well-born souls", but there were also "ignoble" ones that have been called over the years "market-oriented universities", or even "diploma sellers", which were responsible for tarnishing the sector's image that was once glowing, for they compromised its reputation and credibility.

Given the chaos that was tolerated and even encouraged by public authorities, the latter refraining from any decisive intervention to separate the wheat from the chaff, and expressly delaying the establishment of a National Agency for Quality Assurance, the universities worthy of the name bet on quality at their own expense. This is the reason why we consider that the exploits of our institutions are unfortunately not owed to any public support, but rather to their firm resolution.

Moreover, on the eve of the crisis that erupted in October 2019, these universities had acquired a high degree of internationalization and a sterling reputation for promoting employability, not to mention the remarkable improvements exhibited in the areas of pedagogical innovation, research and quality assurance.

Such progress obviously required huge investments in buildings, infrastructure, training, and retention of human capital, etc.

This is all the more admirable as it was carried out without genuine support from the State, and even despite the impediments consisting of the legislative and administrative slowness, coupled with the absence of concrete public data on the labor market and the needs of the economy.

1.3. The Breakdown

While this was done, we all felt the precariousness of the situation. Nevertheless, isn't it precisely because we know, as Lebanese and Christians, how to live and succeed despite the precariousness that we are known for our love of life and our resilience? Yes, the economic crisis was looming on the horizon, our researchers had consistently and repeatedly announced it since the end of the 1990s, but the myth of the phoenix, central piece of the

collective imaginary, was indestructible, never ceased to uplift people, even the most rational ones. Furthermore, the education market continued to be governed by the "Olympic imperative" to always do better, more, and faster, perhaps in the hope that our good intentions would earn us the absolution of the harmful ones expressed by our political leaders, and would thus ease the burden of the destiny awaiting us, even in the slightest degree.

With the growth achieved through thick and thin, the sector served as a shining example of the potential for excellence and resilience lying within the Lebanese economy. In fact, on the eve of the disaster triggered in October 2019, the McKenzie report highlighted the need to make higher education one of the key drivers for the country's economic recovery, and to increase the international capacity of its most prestigious universities, in order to create a knowledge-based economy, and pull the sinking country out of the illusion and the interest-based economy it was caught in.

We expected this inevitable collapse, but we cannot but admit that it was faster and far more violent than the worst predictions we have ever made. It appears that our Lebanese house was actually built on sand, "the rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash" (Mt 7: 27).

Here we are faced with a protean disaster engulfing every corner of our life, and leaving us with only one certainty: unfortunately, the reality is that there is no quick solution to this crisis, we will have to live in this macabre atmosphere for at least a few years.

And the question is: How can we think of the sector's current situation and the conditions of its survival, especially at a time like this?

II. **Multidimensional poverty and mass exodus**

Although Lebanon has not had its "Arab Spring", he was far from being out of the repercussions of all "Springs" mushroomed in the Middle East. The burden of the Syrian refugee influx since 2011, added to the Palestinian refugees already settled since 1948 and 1967, both making up more than 50% of the

population of the country, the highest concentration of refugees *per capita* in the world – and by the way no one is talking about them anymore as if they were an ordinary internal Lebanese issue! – had become too heavy and more than the country could bear. In addition, administrative negligence and systematic corruption perpetrated since 1990s, lack of infrastructure (such as electricity, water, gas, social security, medical insurance, etc.), serious defect in the national trial balance, extended socio-economic and financial crisis, Covid-19 health pandemic, etc. all these factors have led not only to the explosion of the port of Beirut in August 2020, but to the “explosion” of the entire country. As per the September 2021 report of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Lebanon is affected by a multidimensional poverty: 82% are concerned by this multidimensional poverty, 74% live below the income line, 63% are among university students, and 87% among students with the lowest levels of educational attainment. Needless to say, without an aid plan, an entire generation will be at risk of dropping out of university and will suffer from drastic impoverishment, social insecurity, and ensuing abuses. According to the latest World Bank Lebanon Economic Monitor (LEM) for the year 2021, the financial and economic crisis is likely to rank in the top 10, possibly top 3, most severe crisis episodes globally since the mid-19th century. They entitled their report “Lebanon Sinking (to the Top 3)”.¹

As unemployment rates are skyrocketing (according to the World Bank, 20% of workers lost their jobs since October 2019, while 61% of firms reduced the number of employees by 43% on average) and the projections on the length of the crisis are depriving people of any hope, 77% are planning to leave the country.

With the inevitable increase in tuition fees, the soaring fuel prices, and the lack of a support system, this hemorrhage is expected to worsen significantly and to inevitably lead to an aging society and an irreversible economic collapse. As a matter of fact, students are not the only victims. Based on the report

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/publication/lebanon-economic-monitor-spring-2021-lebanon-sinking-to-the-top-3>

published by the Crisis Observatory of Lebanon American University of Beirut, we are currently entering into a third wave of mass emigration.² It is most heavily felt across the vital sectors which once shaped Lebanon's glorious reputation, and were the essence and *raison d'être* of the country, namely those of healthcare and education. According to the same study, hundreds of instructors left for North America, Europe and the Gulf throughout the last year. At *Université Saint Joseph* alone, 412 professors departed during the past 2 academic years, making up of about 38% of its academic body, 17% of its employees, despite the salary adjustments that were made to strengthen retention.

In universities with lower revenues and salaries, the situation is similar if not even worse. In truth, none of them has the financial means to put in place an effective retention plan. Teachers saw their salaries fall by 80%, their savings wiped out, and sadly enough, they were called upon to take on more responsibilities at the beginning of the crisis to replace part-time faculty members. It becomes obvious that the teaching profession in higher education is no longer an attractive career. Antonine University, for instance, lost 58% of its faculty members and 29% of its administrative body during the past 2 academic years. This is the situation of almost all our Catholic universities. It goes without saying that this is a serious threat to the quality of teaching and research, and to the institutional attractiveness and survival.

III. Reactivity and powerlessness

In short, the sector that was once the emblem of national pride is now at the end of its rope. The plight of our private universities counting over 120,000 students, thousands of teachers and employees, all of whom are weakened by the crisis, and struggling to pursue their mission, is the iconic image of Lebanon's agony. Nevertheless, these universities can still serve as proof that recovery is possible, if provided with strategic support.

² The same report highlights that the first exodus occurred in the period spanning from 1865 to 1916, with the emigration of 330,000 citizens. As for the second wave, it was during the civil war (1975-1990), with 990,000 departures.

This is all to say that the sector will not be able to recover on its own. It is already running out of steam due to the vigorous efforts spent for its survival. In the aftermath of the massive explosion at Beirut's port (August 2020), the rectors and presidents of the 11 most prestigious private universities announced their commitment "to never abandon Beirut-Lebanon and our communities in these dark times and throughout the difficult years to come." The difficulty is that this determination alone is no longer enough, for in addition to the heavy deficit resulting from the inability of many of our students to pay their tuition fees, another problem arises from the capital controls imposed by the banks and which consist of increasingly tight restrictions on withdrawals and transfer of funds. We are unable to transfer the necessary amount of money abroad to renew our subscriptions to the various software products and scientific databases.

In this context, several studies were conducted and focused on the shrinking of the sector and the closure of a number of institutions.

IV. Save the Future

Saving higher education means building the Lebanon of tomorrow, even guaranteeing better tomorrows that are worth waiting for.

Saving Lebanese higher education is saving Lebanon's young generations, and keeping them in their homeland where they are most needed.

Yes, we truly need our highly skilled youth to lift us up someday. We put our little hope in young people to reform our institutions, and build the rule of law in Lebanon to replace the current "ungovernable monster", as it has been reported by the newspaper *Le Monde*³.

At this point, there is no room for naive optimism that rely on wishful thinking and castles in the air. The burning question that we are faced with remains: What can we hope for? It is thus essential to become aware of what we can legitimately hope for in order to know what promises we can make: to our

³ See « Liban: l'État, monstre ingouvernable » [Lebanon: the government, ungovernable monster]. Éditorial du *Monde* [Editorial from *le Monde*], 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/11/30/liban-l-etat-monstre-ingouvernable_6061646_3232.html

students, our teachers and employees, our international partners who assist us to the greatest extent possible, and to our martyred society.

This is, indeed, the messianic task that every university leader in Lebanon is called to fulfill: Mobilize all the resources and good intentions to build a lucid and viable expectancy, so that the “little flock” entrusted to us can hear, in the tumult of the cataclysm, the voice of the Lord who will console him saying: "Take courage, I have conquered the world" (John 16: 33).