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The impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the prevailing economic crisis on the Lebanese higher education: experiences and challenges of the Lebanese University

An interview with Professor Zeinab Saad

Based on the experiences made in the [HOPES regional project](#) (April 2016 – August 2020), the follow-up HOPES-LEB project funded as well by the European Union, through the [EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis](#), the 'EU Madad Fund', will be built on the principle of close cooperation and true partnership with local institutions. This is imperative, if a local ownership shall be developed and if interventions shall be in full line with the needs of the countries and societies they are implemented in.

In Lebanon, the HOPES project developed during the last years close ties with the country's biggest and only state-run university, the renowned [Lebanese University \(LU\)](#). Warmly welcomed and always supported by the LU's president, Professor Fouad Ayoub, the project and the university formed a strategic partnership which allowed the successful implementation of the project's activities.

All of the Lebanese and Syrian students sponsored in Lebanon were enrolled at the Lebanese University. Their selection was done under the committed participation of the university's professors which secured an appropriate placement of candidates and a reduction of dropout.

Furthermore, hundreds of students participated in English-language courses provided by HOPES, and the Lebanese University also participated actively in a number of forums of exchange and stakeholder dialogue on the situation of Lebanese higher education under the impact of the refugee crisis.

Now, with the Corona pandemic and the severe economic crisis, the situation has even further deteriorated. HOPES-LEB has talked to Professor Zeinab Saad about the implications the new situation might have for the higher education system in Lebanon in general, and the LU and the HOPES-LEB project in particular.



Professor Zeinab is a professor of physical chemistry in addition to being the general coordinator of the LU's International Relations Office. With her strong commitment and warm empathy, she was key to the establishment of a successful cooperation between HOPES and the LU.

Lebanon is in a very critical situation. The prevailing political and economic crisis was dramatically worsened by the Corona outbreak. How is the state of higher education in general and of the Lebanese University in particular and what do you expect for the near future?

The effect of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, combined with the economic distress caused by Lebanon's financial crisis had a long-term fallout on the country's higher-education institutions. Nationwide, the establishments for education and higher education in Lebanon were included in the ministerial decision regarding lockdown. All the universities in Lebanon closed their doors due to the COVID-19 and they resorted to e-learning, and this is also the case of the whole educational system in Lebanon. However it should be noted that distance learning is not regulated by Lebanese law, and it is not enough to complement the academic programs.

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University students and professors from the faculties of sciences and engineering volunteered to design medical artificial respiratory devices and a robot to help patients and protect medical teams, of which a number were delivered to the public hospitals such as Rafik Hariri University Hospital in Beirut and President Elias Hrawi Hospital.

Furthermore, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and the concerned authorities and through volunteers of the Faculty of Public Health and the University Medical Center, the Lebanese University participated in conducting PCR tests for expatriates at the Rafik Hariri International Airport and land crossings with Syria.

Volunteers from the medical faculties also participated in awareness campaigns and direct guidance through social media, and volunteers from the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Department of Psychology, developed a plan to provide psychological support for patients and their families. With regard to research and scientific strategy development, the LU has allocated a financial budget to support and reinforce scientific research related to the coronavirus and virus diseases in general.

We hope that in the near future this pandemic will end although the efforts made by the international research laboratories still foresee a long duration not less than a year to discover the remediable medicine and vaccine.

In response to the country's economic crisis: The Lebanese University is the only public university in Lebanon. It has more than 82,000 students which means that around 50 per cent or half of the Lebanese university student population are enrolled at the LU. The students at the Lebanese university pay only registration fees which are very reduced. They are payable in Lebanese pounds, to the contrary of the practice at private universities where the student must pay the registration and tuition fees at the same time in US dollars. This explains why we expect the enrolment of a large number of students next year at the Lebanese University. Due to the economic crisis in Lebanon, their number might rise to more than 100,000.

The main obstacles that the LU strives to overcome during the next academic are the needs for more dorms, classrooms, infrastructure on the one hand, and the financial needs on the other, i.e. the problem of the fees and the limited budget allocated by the government to the Lebanese University.

In addition, there are also challenges related to the lack of Lebanese legislation that would frame and organise e-learning, which is necessary to prevent the damage of a possible second wave of the pandemic. For this reason, funding projects such as HOPES-LEB are important to help the Lebanese University students to continue their studies and to pay the enrolment fees.

Having been fully aware of Lebanon's economic problems and the financial obstacles the students and their families faced, and upon the recommendation of its president Professor Fouad Ayoub, a temporary aid fund was created during the present academic year 2020-2019 at the Lebanese University.

This fund is financed optionally by donations from teachers and administrative staff of the university, allowing students to complete their registration in April 2020. In addition, the faculties have facilitated the integration of students and the payment of fees, which are already greatly reduced compared to the fees required in private universities.

Given the economic crisis, the Lebanese University expects a considerable increase in the number of its students who will enrol next year in its various faculties. The university's president has constantly called for financial support in collaboration with foreign donor institutions to expand and implement new campuses throughout the country to meet the economic and social needs of Lebanese university students.

The Lebanese University has been a strategic partner of the EU-funded HOPES project and contributed considerably to the success of this intervention. The European Union has provided through its EU Madad Fund the means for a follow up programme to be implemented exclusively in Lebanon and therefore called HOPES-LEB, and the Lebanese University will be a central partner in the project's implementation. Based on your previous experiences with HOPES, what do you expect from this cooperation?

The Lebanese University participated in the previous EU-funded HOPES project with great enthusiasm; this project subsequently had a brilliant success at the national and international level. In my opinion, this is due to several factors:

> the steering of the project formed by a team of experts from partner institutions and the Lebanese university;

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In light of the coronavirus crisis and economic distress affecting everyone in the country, the Lebanese University has adopted distance learning by using electronic platforms for an e-learning of different courses in different specializations. The main challenge for the Lebanese University was to determine how the students would learn and achieve their programs when physical access to campuses is impossible due to lockdown and health security reasons in order to set up prevention from contamination.

With the beginning of the commitment to public mobilization procedures, our students and teachers made additional efforts to complete the process of e-learning by developing the so called "NOTER" application, despite the weak internet coverage on all Lebanese territories. It is a solution that was affordable for teachers and students at the same time, despite some obstacles encountered which sometimes amount to an inadequate environment at home, the limited apartment area and the number of people living in the same place, in addition to the poor internet connection under perpetual power outage, lack of materials and devices (laptops)...

Furthermore, concerning the doctoral programs, the Lebanese University continued to collaborate online with the foreign universities abroad to ensure all necessary procedures and agreements for the research and lab work of its students. During the period of lockdown, the university's central administration and the administrative staff ensured by their committed work that the requested materials, internet connections and other needs were provided for students and teaching personnel, and this in determined conditions and in continuous swift to safeguard the health of everyone.

Finally, when after a lockdown which lasted 3 months, the Minister of Education and Higher Education recommended to all universities in Lebanon to open their doors again, the Lebanese University was ready to start the classrooms in all the faculties in order to complete the academic programs until the end of September 2020. By then, all requested exams will have happened so that the academic year 2020-2019 can be closed and the new academic year 2021-2020 can start on October 1st. Depending on the concrete situation, several measures will be taken to prevent any contamination; such as safeguarding a social distance between each student, wearing gloves and

and masks by all present in the classrooms – teaching and administrative staff as well as students, but taking everyone's temperature before going to the classroom, and other preventive measures recommended by the Lebanese government. For that end, the Ministry of Health has provided the Lebanese University with 100,000 facemasks and 250 temperature measuring devices.

Which measures have been taken by the LU to face these enormous challenges and where do you see the most pressing need for action?

The Lebanese University has faced the COVID19- and the economic political crisis with a clear vision and a lot of courage at the same time.

In response to the Corona pandemic crisis: The Lebanese University has created the Lebanese University Task Force and formed a trained volunteer team able to move to all parts of the country in the event of an emergency, in coordination with the relevant local and external authorities, and to collaborate with the ministries and health sectors, in order to face the Covid-19 pandemic.

The medical staff, doctors and students of the medical school of the Lebanese University played a major role during the huge crisis by helping the medical staff at the public Hariri hospital and taking care of the people affected by Covid-19. They showed great courage and highly qualified skills in their contribution to overcome the crisis, which has been highly appreciated by the Lebanese society and government.

Moreover, in collaboration with the Ministry of Industry, the Lebanese University has since the beginning of the outbreak helped through direct fieldwork and student initiatives complemented with research work to face the coronavirus crisis and to create solutions.

The President of the Lebanese University, Dr Fouad Ayoub, provided all the facilities and support students and researchers needed for their initiatives, despite the lack of material and financial means. The Lebanese University developed and registered with a number of partners the LU-COVID 19 application that contributes to fighting COVID-19 transmission and reducing its spread, which was adopted by the Ministry of Health in partnership with the World Health Organization. With several initiatives supported by the Lebanese University and industry entities, a group of Lebanese

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- > the vision of the project which was strongly focused on helping vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian students. Focussing on students in need is an objective the Lebanese University is strongly committed to since it welcomes and continuously supports this category of students;
- > the successful applied action and teamwork, the availability of the administrative and academic staff, the action of rescue and support provided to a large number of students allowing them to register in the various faculties to continue their academic studies, and also to develop their skills in the English language;
- > the transparency and reliability of the students' selection procedures, according to their financial and social situation and the excellence of their academic level;
- > the close cooperation between the Lebanese University decision makers and the decision makers and the team of the EU-funded HOPES project.

All these assets enable the Lebanese University to continue with the same objective and to be the central partner in the HOPES-LEB project, in order to sustain the quality of the public higher education in Lebanon, as well as to provide opportunities for a large number of qualified vulnerable students to be enrolled at the university and continue their studies and achieve their degrees.

The enrolment of the ambitious youth at the Lebanese university prevents the increasing of unemployment and reduces social problems, especially during this dramatic and challenging crisis that Lebanon faces.

HOPES-LEB will provide support for vulnerable Lebanese and refugees from Syria alike. How has the situation of the Syrians changed? What needs to be done in their regard?

With the Lebanese economic crisis, the Lebanese University faces enormous challenges; in particular financial challenges due to the limited budget provided by the Lebanese government and the increased number of students who will be enrolled next year 2021-2020. (As has been said, the LU expects that the number of its students will soon exceed the 100,000!)

In fact, the situation has worsened for Lebanese students so that not only Syrian students are in dire straits. Due to the devaluation of the Lebanese currency as well as the closure of several private companies, a large number of Lebanese have lost their jobs and are unemployed.

This resulted in the impoverishment of many Lebanese families, and a huge number of students face serious financial obstacles that could prevent them from continuing their university studies, despite the reduced tuition fees at the LU.

Obviously, Syrian students suffer from the same financial problem, but the case for Lebanese students is emerging and dramatic, and no instruments have been developed to provide relief.

One possible answer could be interventions of international donor organizations and projects like the HOPES-LEB project which could help the students of the Lebanese University to overcome these obstacles. In that regard, the HOPES-LEB project should in our opinion take the miserable situation of students at the Lebanese University into serious account and give them the opportunity to pursue their education in order to complete and achieve their qualifications which will allow them to be active and helpful members of the society.

Finally, despite of all the difficulties and hardships described, what makes you believe that there is hope for getting out of this misery into a better future and what would you advise young people to do in these circumstances?

Hope is the sap of our life, as sap is important for the life of plants, so hope is important for our life. I advise young Lebanese students to never lose hope and trust and never give up, and to always have confidence in their ability and their future, and never let bad circumstances make them think their lives would be bad.

Indeed, Lebanese students have always demonstrated their academic competence at national, regional and international level, which encourages them to develop their academic paths and skills and to believe in their capacity and future and that of their country.

Certainly, Lebanon is recognized as a country of education and culture whose intellectuals and higher education graduates have contributed to the development of education at home and abroad, and the Lebanese students must continue this mission and always remain the pioneers in the field of education and development.

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