

The Crisis of Lebanese Higher Education or the Crisis of the Lebanese Political System?

Abstract

Lebanon is suffering from a severe economic-financial crisis that the World Bank ranks in the top 10, possibly top 3, most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century. This turmoil has resulted from years of corruption, mismanagement, and neoliberal policies, which put the whole political system in the bottleneck. All sectors in the country and especially, higher education, are enduring critical problems. This piece of writing intends to describe the collapsed situation of Lebanese higher education as well as the conditions engendering this breakdown. In discussing this issue, we focus on the different reasons that let private universities to redress the crisis differently than the public university. However, we suppose that this collapsing situation is not a momentary event; however, on the contrary, it is a case that expresses the crisis of the Lebanese political system. Lebanese higher education system has its share of mischievous policies. Nevertheless, the crisis impacted the public sector the most

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Introduction

In the past few years, Lebanon has had the highest rate of university graduates — not only in the Middle East but also in the entire world. The rate of tertiary

graduates was estimated around 80% of the population in 2018. ¹ However, this high rate was threatened to decrease dramatically. This is due to the unprecedented financial and economic crisis, which has hit the country since 2019. This paper intends to describe the collapsed situation of the Lebanese higher education as well as the conditions engendering this breakdown. In discussing this issue, we claim that this collapsing situation is not a momentary event; however, on the contrary, it is a case that expresses the crisis of the Lebanese political system.

In the process, this piece of writing aims at answering the following questions: How is the Lebanese education system affected by the financial and economic crisis? Why has the Lebanese public university (LU) been impacted more than the private sector?

To answer these questions, we have divided this paper into many sections. First, we have introduced the causes of the Lebanese compound crisis. Second, we have provided the readers with an overview of the history of the higher education system in Lebanon. Third, we have shown the impacts of the crisis on the higher education sector, emphasizing on the Lebanese University — the only public university in the country. In the end, we have come up with our conclusion.

Roots of the Lebanese complex crisis

To begin with, the Lebanese people have raided the streets since the 17th of October 2019, triggered by decades of corruption and economic mismanagement. They hit the streets demanding to put an end to the authoritarian oligarchy and the political confessionalism as well as asking for the right to free access to quality higher education (Kabbanji, 2021). The country has sunk into an unprecedented compounded crisis, in addition to the Corona pandemic and lately the Beirut Port explosion² that destroyed over half of Beirut city, where the universities' damages reached millions of dollars (Hoban, 2020). Consequently, the latest World Bank

¹ Trading Economics, Lebanon - Percentage of All Students in Tertiary Education Enrolled in ISCED 6, Both Sexes

<https://tradingeconomics.com/lebanon/percentage-of-all-students-in-tertiary-education-enrolled-in-isced-6-both-sexes-percent-wb-data.html> , access time 8 July 2021.

² On 4 August 2020, a large amount of ammonium nitrate stored at the Port of Beirut in the capital city of Lebanon exploded, causing at least 218 deaths, 7,000 injuries, and US\$15 billion in property damage, and leaving an estimated 300,000 people homeless. Experts consider Beirut port explosion from one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history

report 'Lebanon Economic Monitor' ranked Lebanon's crisis as one of the top 10 (possibly top 3) most severe crisis episodes experienced globally since the mid-nineteenth century (World Bank, 2021).

Moreover, the reasons underlying the compounded crisis date back to around 30 years ago. In 1989, the Taif Agreement³ ended the civil war (1975-1990) and set new policies, which impacted the country politically, economically, and financially.

Politically, this accord fixed a presidential and parliamentary election, where the major parties of the war eventually became the ruling political authorities. The latter has used the state welfare as "a patronage resource and sought to retain control over monopoly rents in consumer markets" (Baumann, 2012). This is the structural reason for establishing a wide resource-exhausting net of clientelism.

Economically, the successive governments adopted the neoliberal policies based on the "state retreat from domains, in which it formerly intervened, its promotion of market-led policies, and its creation of new, purportedly more efficient institutions and agencies" (Verdeil, 2018). One of the main consequences of the adopted policies was the proliferation of market-oriented private universities, which would merchandise higher education.

Financially, since 1992, governments have funded the reconstruction plans⁴ and the expansion of the public sector by debt. The interest rate on the debt reached as high as 36%, where the banking sector was the primary debtor. In 1990, the banking sector held two-thirds of government debt, while the Central Bank was responsible for the other third. Subsequently, banks mainly relied on the public debt to accumulate their capital. Thus, the capital's investments have been channeled towards the public debt and not to the real economic sectors like manufacturing, technology, agriculture, tourism, services, and basically higher education.

³ This agreement, which ended the civil war in Lebanon.

⁴ The National Emergency Rehabilitation Programme (NERP), involving US\$ 2.3 billion public investment over the 1993-1995 period, was proposed and adopted in 1992. It was designed as a multi-sectoral operation focused on emergency repairs and rehabilitation of physical and social infrastructure. The program was subsequently expanded and merged into a ten-year plan, known as Horizon 2000 for Development and Reconstruction, announced by the Government in October 1994. Since the completion of the initial version (US\$ 18.5 billion financing requirements in the 1993-2002 period), there have been several revisions to take into account the evolving national and regional situation and developments in critical factors affecting the course of recovery.

Moreover, the public debt, high interest rates, and oligopolies over trade and production (like oil imports and cement industry) were some of the main reasons behind the extraordinary wealth and income inequality in Lebanon. It is worth mentioning that some experts expect triple-digit inflation as well as a projected increase in poverty to 45% and in extreme poverty to 22%. (World Bank, 21 & Assouad, 2017).

On top of that, Lebanon currently has the highest number of refugees per capita in the world (Yassin et al., 2015). In addition to the existing Palestinian and Iraqi refugee populations, Lebanon hosts 1,017,433 registered Syrian refugees comprising 247,736 households in Lebanon, with an additional estimated 300,000-500,000 unregistered refugees (Janmyr, 2016). Such a sharp increase in population has strained the tiny country's limited resources and has impacted the economic, social, health, and education sectors (El-Ghali et al., 2017).

The aforementioned factors have led to the breakdown of both the financial and economic sectors of the country, which is clear due to many different aspects. However, it is important to mention that the current turmoil is not a momentary crisis that has affected some sectors in the country, subsequently; some adopted reforms will straighten things out. On the contrary, as Kabbanji describes: it is a “crisis that neither affects the way [the system] operates, nor its structural cleavage between its sectarian dimension on the one hand, nor its dependence on the looting of public and private resources (bank deposits of small depositors) by a few located at the heart of the rentier-financial system on the other hand. It is a system in crisis with all its components and it can no longer continue” (Kabbanji, 2021).

Features of the Lebanese higher education system

To clearly understand the crisis's impacts on the higher education system, one has to shed light on the history, structure, and functioning of this system in Lebanon.

The Lebanese higher education system is composed of two sectors: the public that consists of the Lebanese Public University (LU) and the private sector that can be divided into three categories. The first, which is the oldest, is known as “the elite universities”. The second, is the market-oriented universities. The third, is the religious universities (see table below).

Table 1 - Total number of higher education institutions in Lebanon by type for the academic year 2021:

Type of Institution	Number	Year of establishment
Lebanese Public university (LU)	1	1951
Oldest private universities / founded by the religious missionaries	4	1866-1939
Private universities (licensed and operational)	32	1986-....
Private institutes and colleges	9	1986-2015
Private institutes of Theology (two Christian institutes and one Muslim)	3	1932-1999
Private universities (licensed but not operational)	2	

Source: MEHE website, 2021.

Establishment of the sector

The Private Higher education sector in Lebanon backs long before the foundation of the state of Lebanon in 1920. This sector was polarized — for around 85 years — by two private universities: the American University of Beirut (AUB), which was founded by the evangelic missionary in 1866⁵, and Saint Joseph’s University (USJ) which was created in 1875, by the Jesuit Fathers, with the collaboration of Lyon University (Herzstein, 2010). In 1951, after students’ relentless demands and violent confrontations with the police, the Lebanese Public University (LU) was established. The foundation of LU was considered a step towards the democratization of the higher education sector, by making it independent from religious and foreign authorities, and it also “became a major theme of mobilization during the late sixties and the early seventies, a period during which rural-urban migration accelerated” (Nahas, 2010, p:51). Moreover, this institution was established to fulfill a main role of providing adequate training and learning for instructors and teachers (Faculty of Pedagogy) as well as providing the state’s institutions with qualified professional staff. In the late sixties, for the socio-confessional balance, two other private universities were founded. The first is the Arab University of Beirut (BAU), “a subsidiary of Alexandria’s University in Egypt, which [was] considered at the time as an “Islamic” counterweight

⁵ See the following website:

<https://www.aub.edu.lb/AboutUs/Pages/history.aspx#:~:text=After%20collecting%204%2C000%20in%20England,students%20on%20December%203%2C%201866.>

to the domination of AUB and USJ as Christian universities. The second is the Saint-Esprit University, which marks the direct entry of the Lebanese Maronite Monasticism into academia” (Kabbanji, 2012).

The higher education sector remained exclusive to these universities — with some breaches — until the nineties when the sector witnessed the emergence of a new model that is known as market-oriented universities⁶. With their emergence as a response to new liberal policies, there was a “growing demand for higher education in Lebanon” (Jalakh, 2019).

Origin of difference

The private universities differ in many aspects: teach different curricula, address different student clientele, embrace different strategies of formation, and adopt different types of governance. Nevertheless, all of them — since their establishment — tend to homogenize their educational system with the LMD curricula. Although, the private Higher Education is governed by a new law announced in 2014, and work under the tutorship of the Ministry of Education and Higher education (MEHE) through the Directorate General of Higher Education” (Jammal et al, 2017); however, their freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution. According to Article 10, chapter 2 of the Lebanese Constitution, “Education shall be free” and every religious community has the right to have its own schools or universities (Lebanese constitution, 1990). This autonomy reflects their independent governance and free choices from the state.

In Lebanon, 80 to 90% of the resources of private universities come from student tuition fees and therefore rely on the solvency of direct beneficiaries. The clienteles in private higher education come from the most stable middle strata; in other words, government officials and public and private sector employees, with collective bargaining agreements, granting a premium for the education of children. The overwhelming majority of these officials and employees choose private education;

⁶ 48 private universities have been established during the last two decades in Lebanon, knowing that population of Lebanon is 6,819,062, based on Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data.

thus, we can observe a mechanism that allows private higher education to be partially financed from public funds (Kabbanji, 2012). Therefore, despite the common idea that says “Private Higher Education institutions do not receive any direct support from the state” (Jammal et al, 2017), it is clear that they indirectly benefit from it.

The Lebanese University differs in many ways from private universities. It teaches mainly in Arabic, English, or French basically in the applied scientific faculties. Regarding its governance, LU is ruled by the Council of the University formed of its president and respective faculties’ deans. The deans are generally selected by the Council of Ministers from a list elected by the faculty members. Nonetheless, this is currently not the case, because the president of LU — which was appointed for his confessional and political affiliation — has put his hand on the prerogatives of the council and has been illegally ruling the university with a group of deans. Regarding its clientele, they mainly originate from poor and middle-class strata. Moreover, LU is funded by the Government via the ministry of higher education (MEHE) with a moderate contribution from the students (see the table below). This budget is allocated to LU, without following any performance-based funding and is mostly designed to cover salaries and administrative needs (Jammal, 2017). In fact, it has been subjected to recurrent cuts since the nineties, and between the years 2005 and 2014, the Ministry of Finance adjusted the university’s budget towards more crucial areas within the government.

Table 2 - Tuition Fees

Tuition fees in LU per academic year	Lebanese students	International students	Tuition fees in LU per academic year
Bachelor in faculties of theoretical disciplines	195000 LBP/ equal to 9.75\$	945000 LBP	Bachelor in faculties of theoretical disciplines
Bachelor in faculties of applied disciplines	245000 LBP/ equal to 12.25\$	995000 LBP	Bachelor in faculties of applied disciplines

The tuition fees within the Public Higher Education are almost free. It contributes to only 6.5% of its total budget (National report, 2019). The humble fees make the LU attractive to students from poor and middle-class strata, for example, students enrollment in higher education reached 219,248 students during the academic year 2018/2019. Of these students, 37% (81,024 students) were enrolled in

the LU, while 63% (138,224 students) were distributed over all private universities. Therefore, it is clear that the LU attracts the largest number of students.

Neoliberal policies and the reconfiguration of the higher education field

After the end of civil war (1975-1990), with the announcement of the Taif agreement, the successive Lebanese governments adopted neoliberal policies which were based primarily on “using state welfare as a patronage resource” (Baumann, *ibid*, 2012). This in turn has created a vicious circle“ since the state is unable to provide many services [that] the Lebanese demand, [and] the population becomes reliant on services provided by politicians or political parties, delegitimizing the state for citizens, who then bestow that legitimacy on political representatives” (Young, 2009).

As a result, the socio-economic scene has been reconstructed, based on the distribution of power between the politico-sectarian groups (Baydoun, 2012, P: 256). At the same time, a new socio-educational policy reconstructed higher education structures as Kabbanji elucidates (2012). Subsequently, since 1990 the Lebanese higher education system has witnessed a rapid expansion of private universities to reach 48 institutions that are mainly owned by the members of the ruling sectarian political class. This new batch of universities was perceived as a lucrative business and has opened the sector to the commodification of education (Jalakh, 2019).

Furthermore, the Lebanese University has known the largest amount of changes with regards to the neoliberal and sectarian policies. Its relative autonomy guaranteed by the law⁷ was breached by many decrees. One was when the legislative decree N° 1228 branched the university into 5 branches and allowed the university president to confiscate university council prerogatives. Another decree — N° 1167 issued in 1978 — gave the university president the right to nominate members of the teaching body instead of the college boards. Those decrees left, along with the adopted neoliberal policies in higher education, a clear imprint on the structure of LU as a scientific field. Some of these changes include but are not limited to the radical change in its morphological structure as a scientific field and the amendment on the

⁷ Law 75/67 endows Lebanese university administrative, academic, and financial freedom.

⁸ N°122, 30 June 1977

LU role. The first change spurred the growth of the enrollment from rural areas, — considerably females — as well as the significant expansion in political and confessional recruitment of professors distinguished by their confessional and political affiliations. The second change was the radical hit of the role of the LU as a public institution, which turned it into a patronage and clientelism resource to reproduce the ruling class.

Nonetheless, one has to wonder how these universities participate in the economy. We mentioned that LU originated to provide the state with academic and qualified staff. Whereas, one has to wonder how a large number of private universities serves a small country with a population that does not exceed 6 million. The reality of youth migration may explain this phenomenon, where “the total stock of Lebanese emigrants, stood at around 1.9 million out of a total population of 4.5 million and the majority of emigrants [were] aged between 20 and 64 years” (Dibeh, Fakih, & Marrouch, 2017). In relation to the high rate of tertiary graduates (80% of the population), it can be concluded that private universities, basically the market-oriented ones, release graduates into the market for the purpose of exportation rather than feeding the national economy.

For all the mentioned reasons, the responses of the two sectors toward the crisis would differ dramatically.

The sector responses to the challenges

This overview on the higher education sector helps in reading better how the sector will be affected differently by the financial and economic crisis. It goes without saying that both the private and public sectors have been affected by the devaluation of the Lebanese currency, COVID-19, and the declining socio-economic conditions. Both, public and private universities have been damaged, but the degree of detriment varies regarding the autonomy of the institution from the state or “ruling class” that offers the universities administration, its malleability in taking free, and flexible decisions.

Private universities absorbing the crisis

Private universities alleviated their losses in many ways. One of these solutions was the raising and dollarization of tuition fees. In this context, the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the Lebanese American University (LAU) adopted a new Lira rate equal to 3,900 LBP/USD (the official rate is still 1,515 LBP/USD). That step dollarized the tuition fees and raised them by around 260%. For example, the tuition fee of only one year in the school of medicine at AUB increased from around 60 million LBP to about 160 million LBP. Hence, chances of pursuing a university degree are now challenging, where incomes are still equal to the 1,507 LBP/USD rate. Moreover, some private “universities required the payment of tuition fees in dollars and imposed restrictions on students who did not pay [the] fees on time” (El-Ghali, 2020).

Other dire resorts for private universities were the dismissal of some professors, blinding some courses, and the closure of entire academic departments. For instance, AUB — considered one of the most prestigious universities in the country — dismissed 850 staff members, closed entire academic departments, and canceled many contracts of its part-time lecturers (Rose.S, 2020; Dhaybe, 2020). Lately, things have taken a serious path when the Crisis Observatory at the American University of Beirut has concluded that the crisis-hit nation is getting into a 3rd mass exodus wave of immigration. The report mentioned that in AUB itself 190 professors, who immigrated, were already registered during the year of their departure, which makes up about 15 % of the academic physique.⁹ Nonetheless, In order to redress the bleeding of human resources, AUB’s administration decided to pay “part of their [professors]’ salaries in fresh dollars, after the university financed it with about \$150 million from its endowment abroad” (Hussein, 2021). In the same context, after losing around 10-15% of its academic staff, LAU followed the lead of AUB and paid part of the salaries in USD.

⁹ See the Facebook page Lebanon Crisis Observatory, Indicators warn of a ‘third mass exodus’ from Lebanon: AUB Crisis Observatory, <https://www.facebook.com/CrisisObservatory/>

This collapsing situation has pushed eleven universities to issue an adjuration statement asking “the authorities to act urgently to prevent the higher education sector’s collapse”, and mentioning that it will have “a catastrophic impact on the social reality in Lebanon in general” (Statement, 2020).

The LU: the infectious relation with the political system?

The financial and economic crisis weighs even more deeply on LU’s faculty and staff members. The continuous devaluation of the Lebanese currency, which has lost 90% of its value since October 2019, has not only effectively reduced the university’s budget, but has also affected the social and medical benefits of the professors and employees (Al-Modon, 2021). This situation will inevitably lead to the inability of LU in securing the simplest needs of its students, like printing paper for exams, a scenario that has previously occurred during the exam periods (Bsat, 2021). This dire fact has pushed the Commission of the Association of Full-Time Professors at LU to release a statement announcing that they “refuse to start a new academic year, and stop all academic work starting from the first of October 2021” (Middle East, 2021). That means that around 81,000 students will miss their academic year.

Moreover, the academic body suffers on two levels: first, from the prevailed economic crisis as everybody does, and second, from the political interference and inequality of recruitment and promotion.

In this respect, the LU teaching body consists of nearly 6,000 professors¹⁰ distributed between tenured (11.66%), Tenure-track position yearly contracted (16.66%), and adjunct professors¹¹ (71.66%). These three categories teach in 17 faculties and three doctoral schools¹², in which 81,024 students¹³ are enrolled. Since 2014, more than a 100 teachers have retired yearly, while no full-time professors have been recruited instead. It is worth mentioning that around 80% of the academic

¹⁰ Data on higher education institutions are in major dismay, so we sometimes use a different number to the same figure.

¹¹ Adjuncts staff are paid per hour, full-time teachers are paid monthly based on yearly automatically renewable contracts, while tenure-track professors have open-ended contracts.

¹² Lebanese University website, <https://www.ul.edu.lb/faculte/faculties.aspx>

¹³ In the academic year 2018-2019.

courses are taught by adjunct professors who represent the largest number of the teaching body, are paid based on the number of hours of actual teaching, and are not given social and medical services as well as any pension. This situation breaches the LU's by-law (Law 6/70 Article 5) that indicates that full-timer professors should teach 80% of academic courses. Things do not stop at this point; the interference of the ruling class in the intern issue of the LU makes it incapable of handling the impacts of the crisis. The LU urgently needs to recruit and allocate full-time professors, but ironically the ruling sectarian class has frozen the recruitment and promotion of more than 4,300 professors, for more than 8 years. That is due to the disagreement of the confessional and political leaders on the quotas while neglecting the academic criteria from one side (Awada, Tabar, Kabbanji, & Alhassbani, 2019), and from the other side, to the acquiescence of the ruling power to the World Bank's terms in decreasing the size of public services.

Consequently, this imbalance in the recruitment process and in the equilibrium of teaching staff negatively influences the teaching performance.

Conclusion

It is not a hastened conclusion if we say that since the nineties a prevailed conviction has believed that neoliberalism was the required solution for the 'flourishment' of the country's economy after the war. Indeed, a recipe made from a combination of neoliberal policies and corrupted political sectarian strategies, supported with a large net of patronage and clientelism, has not only replaced the state institutions but has also applied, looted, and depleted them. Therefore, it can't be ignored that the core problem is deeply rooted within the ruling class, which has set these mischievous policies that have drastically hit the whole system. Hence, the enlarging gap of inequity between the public and private sector was one of the fallouts of these implementing policies as well as an increase in the polarization between public and private universities. Neoliberalism as Mahfouz concluded has "contributed to the collapse of

public education in Lebanon by surfacing tensions between the right to education and freedom of education” (Mahfouz, 2021).¹⁴

In this context, the problem of the higher education sector is deeply rooted and related to the Lebanese structural system turmoil that has paralyzed the public sector and handicapped LU — the only public university — from fulfilling its role of providing the poor and middle class with education of quality. The sector's rapid response to the crisis is due to its independence from the state. The evidences that we presented shows how the private sector took the initiative to pick up the effects of the crisis, while, the austerity and recurrent budget cuts of the LU in parallel has obstructed the functioning of the university as a public entity. This was done by breaching its relative autonomy, which has made it incapable of facing the compound crisis of the country. Subsequently, LU has been handicapped till this moment and it has no tangible initiative to start the academic year.

We are not overdoing it if we conclude that the reckless political economic policies put the whole system into the bottleneck and for the first time since the declaration of the state of Lebanon in 1926, the ruling power has no ability to reproduce itself.

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