

Internationalization of Tertiary Education in MENA

Good afternoon from Beirut! I would first like to thank the authors of the report for giving us the first benchmark of its kind on internationalization of higher education in MENA. In view of the dramatic changes in education brought on by the global pandemic, this report will undoubtedly inform a more strategic and contextual direction for internationalization in the region. One of the most inspiring aspects of the report is its mapping of internationalization efforts across MENA although much remains unknown because access to data is limited. Even within our own institutions, we are as yet unable to capture all the activities that might fall under the umbrella of internationalization but the report is a starting point and will hopefully encourage further research in this field.

At AUB, we have been very active in the field of internationalization although our efforts are decentralized and not always *intentional* – i.e. intended to be part of comprehensive internationalization per se. I will begin by giving a few examples of internationalization as enacted by the Office of **International Programs. Founded just over ten years ago, its mission was clear:** to forge institutional partnerships for mobility; promote international experiences for AUB students, faculty, and staff; and support international students at AUB.

But to achieve our mission, we had to first figure out what the **opportunities** were.

When I joined almost seven years ago now I was struck by how timid we were in the way we projected just how much we had to offer – Lebanon as a destination was tainted by bad press and not considered “safe” although it was in many ways safer than most capital cities around the world – but we were not communicating our comparative value. Political instability and conflict in the region opened up space for Lebanon - given its relative stability - to attract more students. We worked hard to promote both Lebanon as a destination and the advantages of studying at AUB in particular. And these advantages included not just the diverse course offerings across faculties and disciplines but also opportunities for community service and civic engagement, internships and the chance to study with our scholars and professors many of whom are engaged in compelling and relevant research. *The irony here of course is that the very issues many internationals are interested in studying are the same as those driving our own population to leave but as long as there is a balance, that is ok.* **We also set about building our portfolio of study abroad opportunities for AUB students.**

One of the crucial elements in the success of this plan to attract international students was to build trust and the most obvious way to do that was to develop a crisis management plan. This was important for our partners and prospective partners, students and their parents, scholarship providers and foundations. The plan inspired confidence and sent a message that we were serious and that we could be trusted. this served us well even in the fall 2019 – students wanted to stay.

What did we Achieve? over the past 7 and up until Covid:

- a. Increased both the number and the diversity of partners opening up opportunities for our students to go abroad and for us to receive visiting and exchange students - By last Fall 2019, we had the highest ever number of visiting and exchange students
- b. Signed over 60 Erasmus+ agreements with 40 partners allowing not just students but faculty and staff to benefit and post-covid succeeded in securing university-level approval for virtual exchanges
- c. Developed robust support mechanisms for international students by creating a position responsible for visa & residence permits who is also the official liaison with general security
- d. Organized first workshop on challenges and opportunities of internationalization in Lebanon with LAU, USEK, the Lebanese University and USJ which led us to collaborate in hosting the STUDY IN LEBANON booth at the EAIE 2019 annual conference
- e. In 2020 we Published a self-study report that was externally reviewed and culminated in a strategic plan for a more comprehensive and intentional form of internationalization at AUB. *Because up until now internationalization has been decentralized: the other challenge has been capturing all the internationalization efforts as an office we do not count the research collaborations or the internships for example.*

2. What have the Challenges been?

Our greatest challenges - before October 2019 – have been on the **national policy level: Lebanese laws and regulations** have not been adapted to deal with the specific needs of international students be they visas for students coming from “non-traditional” destinations like Afghanistan or Somalia or the complicated procedure of securing equivalencies for high school diplomas which are in turn also necessary to obtain residence permits. We’ve tried to address this by opening communication channels with MEHE and GS

On online learning, the law is silent. AUB has joined forces with other universities to advocate for an active recognition of online learning in various parliamentary committees. In part thanks to the fact our degrees and programs are accredited by the NYSBE, we have nevertheless been able to move forward on a number of online programs, courses, certificates and diplomas that do not require such approval. 2.5

3. In Lebanon we have faced multiple **crises** since the October Protests of 2019 which ironically prepared us well for Covid because they forced us to go online in November so that by the time we entered the first lockdown in March 2020, online teaching and learning had been tried and tested. But the greatest challenge this past year – at least for our own students – not so much for internationals - has been the free fall of the economy and 80% devaluation of the national currency putting tremendous pressure on the population and driving the unemployment rate to

new highs. Many Lebanese are no longer able to pay their tuition fees...and this has also accelerated the brain drain not just of students but of faculty and staff as well. The August 4 explosion served to exacerbate an already critical situation.

- **Covid on the other hand has in some ways brought about more opportunities than challenges -** and in particular opportunities for internationalization through online education
- The pressure to move towards online learning is not new but there was push back and what Covid did was it accelerated and necessitated this move, a move that was also made possible thanks to funding that foundations and grant agencies diverted into e-learning. AUB made a strategic decision to **adapt** to and to capitalize on this situation: For example:
 - The Maroun Semaan Faculty of Engineering and Architecture recently received funding to develop its online capabilities and to launch three new programs in STEM: building energy systems; computer science and engineering and engineering management as well as 20 residential MSFEA courses, and a robust and multi-functional online education unit capable of responding to the evolving needs of Arab industries and learners. Interestingly this is a performance-based grant and some of the metrics and targets that have to be adhered to include: recruiting from the Arab world, with a particular focus on women, refugees and low-income students.
 - To date, two programs are underway:
 - 1 is the online masters in engineering management: Petrofac signed up 100 of their engineers to take this masters (50 in fall and 50 in spring) and the majority of their students are non-Lebanese.
 - And the other is the online graduate diploma in building energy systems
 - The Olayan School of Business launched its online MBA this past fall term and also participated in a virtual exchange with the Stevens Initiative
 - The Summer Arabic program went online last summer and will be online again this summer because of the pandemic
 - Our faculty of arts and sciences received a large grant from the Ford Foundation to adapt courses to include gender components and targets people with disabilities, and underserved students who would not normally be able to afford an AUB education: 1 outcome of this is “teaching online” diploma that is intended for professionals in the field of education to enhance their pedagogical, technological and psychological skills in the realm of online teaching (to be launched fall 2021) and the second is the computing in education master’s program that will train for effective instructional design and also graduate people who can teach computing in schools.
 - AUB joined the Open Society University Network which allows universities in the network to collaborate on courses, internships, global learning and more

In a sense, the pandemic forced a major recalibration in international education globally

and levelled the playing field by exposing our shared vulnerabilities. Online education will of course give access to many more students who might not otherwise be able to attend AUB in person for whatever reason and transcends some of the obstacles mentioned. Crucially, many of these online initiatives are focused on building useful skills for our graduates in a job market that is also changing fast. Erasmus+ is ever more important in keeping us connected to our European partners especially because of the funding. The fact that the Lebanese Lira has lost its value also means that AUB is more affordable to international students (another opportunity).

Moving forward, we need to focus on putting some structure around what has been a rather organic process in response to Lebanese crises and the pandemic so as to shape internationalization in a way that takes us beyond crisis mode and benefits us in the long term— and us not just as a university but as a country and a region. And if possible, we must continue to contextualize internationalization and to collaborate with each other and learn from each other. Thank you!