

Surviving the Crises: Lebanon's Higher Education in the Balance

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¹ Information on the higher education structure (HES) should be available at the official ministry weblink, <http://www.higher-edu.gov.lb/>; however, the page is inaccessible. Instead, for basic information on HES, see http://wbfiles.worldbank.org/documents/hdn/ed/saber/supporting_doc/CountryReports/TED/SABER_TED_Brief_Higher_Education_Lebanon.pdf.

² Reports on the HE sector in Lebanon refer to 42 private institutions; however, the Statistical Bulletin published by the Centre for Educational Research and Development at MEHE lists 48. See the 2019-2020 report at <https://www.crdp.org/statistics-bulletin>.

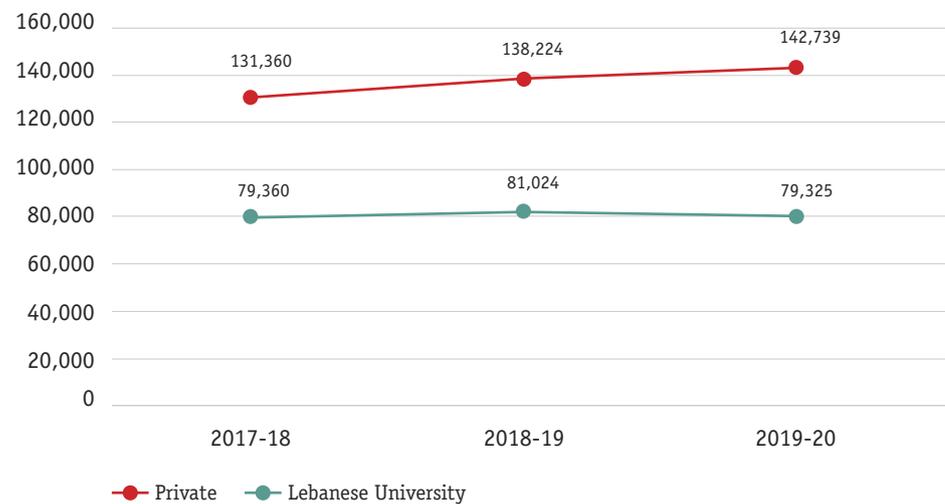
Introducing the higher education sector

The higher education (HE) sector in Lebanon is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE).¹ While universities and colleges can exercise significant degrees of autonomy under the Lebanese constitution (article 10), they are required to comply by the governing regulations at the MEHE Directorate General of Higher Education. The HE sector in Lebanon comprises one public university (Lebanese University - LU) and 48 private HE institutions.² The first universities in Lebanon were established by Christian missionaries: the American University of Beirut (AUB) in 1866 as the Syrian Protestant College and Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth in 1875.

According to the 2020 *Statistical Bulletin* published by the Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD) at MEHE, 222,064 students were enrolled in higher education institutions for the 2019-20 academic year. The breakdown of enrollment figures between the LU and private institutions shows that over a third of students in Lebanon are enrolled in the public university (see figure 1). Furthermore, more females than males are enrolled in higher education institutions—more than two-thirds of males and over half of females attend private institutions (see figure 2). The private universities range significantly in student population, with figures as low as 28 students at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary and up to 34,982 students at the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK) (CERD, 2020).

Figure 1

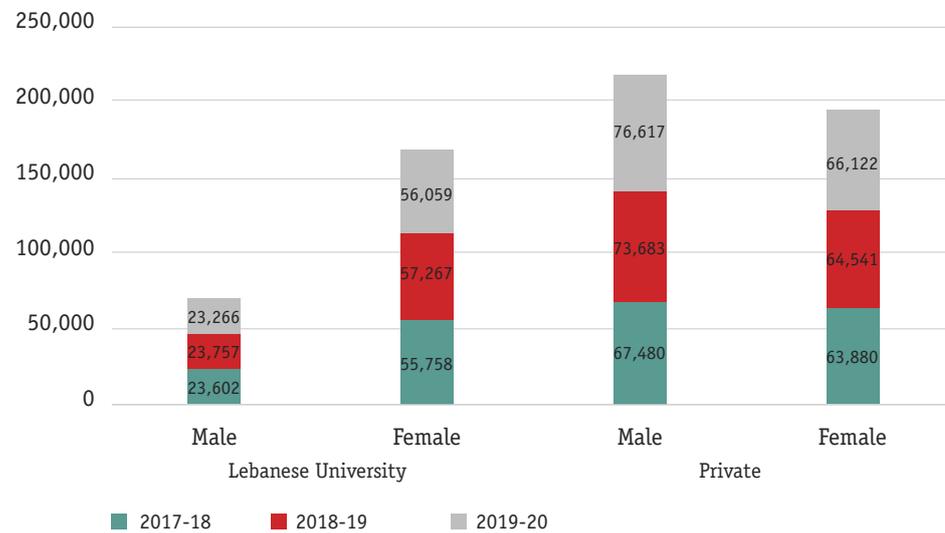
Student enrollment in public and private institutions in Lebanon over three academic years



Source Annual Statistical Bulletin reports at <https://www.crdp.org/statistics-bulletin>

Figure 2

Student enrollment figures by gender at LU and private institutions



Source Annual Statistical Bulletin reports at <https://www.crdp.org/statistics-bulletin>

Examining higher education during compounded crises

Since the eruption of multiple financial, political, and economic crises in 2019, Lebanon has fallen into a downward spiral that has destabilized the higher education sector. Over the past three years (2019-2022), reports and headlines on almost any situation in Lebanon have been contextualized within a state of economic collapse, political uprisings, social exclusion, poverty, corruption, migration, and violent struggles for diminishing resources. Lebanon already struggles with systemic corruption (Transparency International, 2022), history of armed conflicts (1975-1990 civil war), and hosting the largest population of refugees per capita in the world (UNHCR, 2018). Since the political uprisings in October 2019, nearly 82% of the population live in multidimensional poverty (ESCWA, 2021), the currency has lost at least 90% of its value, and the 4 August Beirut port explosion displaced nearly 300,000. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Lebanese government initiated lockdown measures and restricted mobility in March 2020. Consequently, all educational institutions moved to online platforms. Schools remained mostly closed for two academic years during the pandemic.

At the epicenter of these struggles has been higher education. While a few universities appear to be recovering, others continue to struggle. The existential crisis of Lebanese higher education threatens the resilience, recovery, and sustainable development of a nation made fragile by sectarian tensions, corruption, gross mismanagement, and a history of internal and regional armed conflict.

To date, there are few academic studies assessing how faculty members, students, and administrators in higher education have responded to the immediate escalation of barriers to continuing professional careers and learning at the university. What we do know about the troubles faced by students, teachers, and administrators in higher education during the compounded crises have, by and large, come mostly from news media (see Abi Nader, 2021; CERD, 2020; France 24, 2022; Kadi, 2022; Perry, 2020; Ramadan, 2022).

This policy brief presents narratives from students (n=8), faculty members (n=12), and senior administrators (n=7) from five private universities and the public Lebanese University. The private universities in this study are categorized into two profiles: (1) those that have well-established financial resources, such as endowments (American University of Beirut - AUB, Lebanese American University - LAU, Université de Sainte-Joseph de Beyrouth - USJ) and (2) those that do not have long-established structures to build financial resources (Notre Dame Univeristy, Louaize - NDU and University of Balamand).

Conversations from the semi-structured interviews lasted approximately one hour each and took place using online platforms. The questions for faculty members and senior administrators focused on (a) university actions during crises (e.g. salaries, tuition fees, damage caused by Beirut port blast); (b) responses from faculty members and senior administrators (e.g. emigration, well-being, transportation) and (c) any changes in approaches to teaching and research. Conversations with students inquired about responses to changes in tuition, learning, and well-being.

Semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth explorations into personal experiences that close-ended surveys cannot capture. They provided voice to faculty members and students marginalized by the dominant political discourses analyzing the crises. They yielded unique insights and even distressing testimonies that revealed the complex dimensions of social injustices within the higher education sector in emergencies. The testimonies provide a qualitative evidence base to prompt further investigations into how students, faculty members, and administrators in higher education navigate social injustices during crises. The collection of case studies can and should also inform national and university-based policy development to strengthen the resilience of higher education institutions during the ongoing crises, as well as prepare for future ones.

Recovering salaries during the currency collapse

Universities in Lebanon pay monthly salaries in Lebanese pounds (LBP), the local currency. Prior to the crash of the LBP, some universities paid in US dollars (USD); however, they reverted to LBP nearly a year before to the collapse. Beginning in the spring of 2020, the currency took a nosedive, losing more than half its value by that April. Hence, the value of monthly salaries depreciated tenfold. The salary figures and adjustments below were reported by faculty members from various universities.

Responses from private university administrators were determined by the financial resources available. Universities without established endowments, which refers to virtually all but two or three, took relatively a longer time to increase salaries while the adjustments were a fraction of the value prior to the currency collapse. Following the spring and fall 2020 semesters, most private universities increased salaries for faculty and staff. The salary values were adjusted in two main phases. During the first phase, salaries increased 35-50% in LBP, depending on the university. This meant that by fall 2021, the monthly salary of an assistant professor of 4 million LBP was increased

to 6 million LBP. The change in USD value, however, remained at a loss, from 2,600 USD (4 million LBP at 1,515 LBP/USD) to 400 USD (6 million LBP at 15,000 LBP/USD black market rate).³

By spring 2022, many of the private universities were paying a percentage of salaries in USD (in most cases, it 10% of the full salary or around 200 USD). One university had three categories for their teaching faculty: full-time type A (200 USD), full-time type B (150 USD), and part-time (ratio of credits taught). The salary adjustments are reportedly disproportionate to what faculty members need to cover basic costs or maintain a quality of work. One assistant professor at a private university claimed, 'They haven't compensated us in a way we can survive.' Furthermore, the depreciation of monthly salaries was among the primary reasons for the emigration of faculty (Perry, 2020), a contributing factor to other threats of resilience in the sections below.

Universities with an established endowment introduced the USD salary percentage earlier. By the summer of 2020, their faculty members were receiving up to 20% in USD, and then up to 30% by the fall of 2021. At one of these universities, the administration immediately secured an annual rescue salary of 20,000 USD for each faculty member. The second phase was to replace the scheme with securing 25% of the salary in USD. For those whose 25% was less than 20,000 USD, the university ensured they continue receiving the rescue salary. Currently, faculty members receive their salary in three different ways: LBP, USD, and 'Lollars.'⁴ Even with such adjustments, a faculty member in medicine reported that these amounts were only a fraction of their original salary.

An associate professor at a university that provided the rescue salary initiative focused on prioritizing the welfare of the faculty members and that securing salary raises before raising tuition was a tremendous feat. These universities managed to continue their commitments to covering faculty and staff children's school fees and housing benefits, despite the toll these expenses took on the university budget. An associate professor commended its university for maintaining payments of children's education up to undergraduate studies, even if studies were in the US. These universities also started restoring payments for conference travel, prioritizing faculty members in their first and second years. Nevertheless, such testimonies were, by far, the exception.

Salaries at the public university remained unchanged.

3

For a chart mapping the change of the LBP currency in the black market or foreign exchange offices, visit lirate.org.

4

Lollars, or local dollars, are USD deposited in banks prior to the economic collapse but can only be withdrawn in LBP at the exchange rate set by the bank, which is currently at 8,000 LBP/USD.

Faculty members report struggles and dilemmas

University faculty members reported numerous struggles and dilemmas that have stemmed from the rise in the cost of living and the falling value of their salaries, despite adjustments. In some of the private universities with troubled financial resources, the additional payments in USD has been used as a bargaining chip for the university to negotiate for unpaid, additional work. One faculty member reported their dean leveraging payments in USD to take on additional courses, 'I'm paying you in USD, but I need you to teach another two courses.' 'The university is doing anything to get money...and benefit as much as they can from you,' explained another assistant professor who was indirectly asked to contribute a percentage of a fellowship award to the university. He said that his dean 'lowered the value of my work by claiming that my research does not raise the ranking of the university' to make a case for either 'us to teach more' or, if we protest, to 'become a part-timer to save on benefits.' In another university, an associate professor received a research grant of 20,000 USD, but reported that the university finance officer suggested, 'The university can pay the researchers in Lebanese pounds at the official rate (1,507 LBP/USD) or you can donate the research grant (20,000 USD) to the university and do the research work. I explained that we would have to return the grant if we cannot pay in the currency we received the money in. The financial officer preferred to return the grant and so it was returned.'

In universities without strong endowments, many of the faculty who have chosen to stay in their current positions reported having either a second income generated by their partner, or have family dependents, mainly parents, whose livelihoods rely on their salaries and benefits. Some explained that they now rely mostly on securing a supplemental income in foreign currency. Most of those earning a second income work as consultants to non-governmental local and international organizations. Very few have had access to external funds for academic work, such as funded research or guest lecturing. An assistant professor, who is employed full-time at a private university and part-time at the Lebanese University, accepted a short-term fellowship in France that paid him 1,000 EUR for each of the four seminars he gave. This additional income helped him cover basic living expenses, including power generator bills that range between 100 USD and 500 USD per month.

Faculty members, who continued teaching at the Lebanese University or some of the private universities, have likened their work to 'volunteering.' At the Lebanese University, where salaries are paid three years after each semester of work, an assistant professor argued, 'They want us to teach like slaves,'

when having to cover costs for teaching from home or transportation to campus, but not receiving an income. He explained, 'We have to pay for Internet, electricity, data, hardware repairs,' when teaching online from home in addition to daily living expenses, but 'they're not paying [our monthly salaries]'.

Most of the part-timers and some full-timers at the Lebanese University have been on strike, because salaries are delayed for so long. Those who are receiving their late salaries now find little value in the 18 million LBP for a full-course load they taught three years ago, especially in light of having to pay 4 million LBP a month today for generator bills. The value of 18 million LBP dropped from 12,000 USD in 2019 to 600 USD in 2022. Hence, one instructor believes 'it's going to get worse when we have to go in person' and need to pay for car petrol. In retrospect, the same faculty member concluded that the 'Lebanese University did nothing to keep its professors.'

The conditions have even forced some faculty members at the public and private universities to continue working. At one of the private universities, two cases illustrate this. A full-time lecturer reported that their colleague is the primary 'bread-winner' of the family and lives on campus. For the month of April, her colleague's salary was reduced to zero, because they 'deducted inflated electricity and heating expenses from her salary and she now owes the university money.' In the same university, the lecturer spoke about a male assistant professor who also lives on campus housing and is struggling. The lecturer recounted a difficult situation, in which 'some colleagues got him food.' She explained that 'he lost 20 kgs...he skips meals to get himself to last. He is 71 years old and this is his last year before retirement.

At the private universities, only a few faculty members in senior administrative positions who were interviewed praised some of the response efforts to retain faculty members. Many deans and faculty members in these universities, however, reported the high number of resignations among faculty and administrative personnel. The percentage of resignations depends on the department and university. The universities did not have figures to share, but the faculty members interviewed estimated an average of about half. Those at the Lebanese University reported that many of their peers resigned to teach abroad. While praising the high level of qualifications and accomplishments of some faculty members, one assistant professor at the Lebanese University asserted, 'We're all in a prison and are looking for a way to leave.'

Adjusting tuition fees

Salary adjustments, primarily among newer universities, were closely aligned with increases in tuition fees. Private universities initially raised tuition fees in LBP, before introducing percentages to be paid in USD. Two universities with established endowments were the first to adjust their tuition fees. By spring 2021, students in one of these universities paid their fees in LBP, according to the bank's exchange rate at the time (3,900 LBP/USD), while in the other at 2,900 LBP/USD. For the fall 2022 semester, AUB and LAU called for full tuition payments in USD.⁵

5

AUB tuition fees at:
<https://www.aub.edu.lb/comptroller/Documents/Students/Tuition%20Fees.pdf>.
 LAU tuition fees at:
<https://www.lau.edu.lb/fees/2022-2023/>.

Private universities without established endowments delayed changes to tuition exchange rates, due to pressure from organized student groups. Some universities, however, during that time initially set a rate of 2,950 LBP/USD. By spring 2022, most university tuition fees were invoiced at a rate of 3,900 or 5,500 LBP/USD (e.g., Beirut Arab University), and a fixed operational expense in fresh USD (between 200-600 USD). Students and faculty at universities that delayed increases in the exchange rate noticed a steady increase in students, as they remained affordable. For the fall 2022 semester, students in these universities reported tuition fee statements asking for 25% of the tuition in USD and the remaining amount in LBP, at a rate of 5,000 LBP/USD.

The Lebanese University is a public institution that charges annual registration fees, which have not changed over the course of the crises. At the LU Faculty of Humanities, for example, Lebanese and Palestinian nationals pay 195,000 LBP, while other foreign students pay 945,000 LBP for undergraduate studies (graduate and post-graduate studies are set at 745,000 LBP and 1,745,000 respectively). Any changes in tuition—whether an increase in LBP or introducing payments in USD—will require government approval. If the government does not make such amendments, 'the [Lebanese] university will not function anymore,' according to one assistance professor, because they will not be able to cover operating costs. However, if the government does increase tuition in LBP, a significant number of students will no longer be able to afford university fees. The minimum wage in Lebanon is set at 675,000 LBP, which translates to 23 USD in the average black market exchange rate during summer 2022.

Teaching online and the return to classrooms

Universities varied in how they organized the return to classrooms. Faculty members and students reported that the switch from on-campus classrooms to online teaching platforms has been very challenging. As one of the professors

interviewed said, 'it's as if you are talking to a black screen, because most students do not turn on their videos and many do not contribute.' So, he adds, 'we lost the human dimension to teaching; it became mechanical.' Moving to online platforms also threatened to compromise certain professional programs that rely on lab work, in-person interactions, and application.

The early and sudden departure of faculty members has also largely threatened the quality of many higher education programs in three ways. First, some universities have reportedly stopped offering certain programs of study, even shutting down whole departments. Second, the risk of burnout has significantly increased affecting the quality of learning and teaching as working conditions and compensation have deteriorated. Faculty members who remained in programs that had lost more than half of their instructors are therefore forced 'to carry the weight of the entire department,' as one faculty member put it. Administrators, for their part, reported a third concern: New applicants for the vacant positions are far less qualified than those who left.

Many of the universities have returned to mandatory on-campus attendance. Following the return to classrooms, faculty members reported a 'loss of learning' among the first- and second-year students. A professor of engineering and an associate professor of education observed lower levels of basic conceptual knowledge in comparison to previous years. These students received the last two years of their secondary education online and, so, have fallen behind. Distance learning in Lebanon during school closures significantly hindered the quality of learning (Assaf & Nehmeh, 2022). Highly concerned, the associate professor believes that we have not 'completely seen [the gap] yet. The coming years are going to be a disaster. They've been online for two years.'

Cutbacks in research and development

As university administrators scrambled to ensure uninterrupted learning and teaching, the research and development components of most universities were jeopardized. With the exception of universities with large endowments, institutions lost most of their subscriptions to academic journal databases. Universities also froze hiring, sabbatical leaves, international travel to conferences, and infrastructure projects. Faculty members in these private universities expressed lower levels of motivation and morale because they felt that their university had prioritized building spaces, like a sports center, over the emotional and physical wellbeing of their staff and faculty.

Student coping mechanisms

Students in private universities reported having very few options when their tuition fees increased, with some relying more on financial aid, while others left university. There were students who began taking the minimum number of credits permitted per semester to save money, but as one student stated, 'If the tuition in USD rises, they will eventually leave.' Administrators at universities with established endowments reported significant advances in raising funds for scholarships and financial aid. One senior administrator noted that, thanks to endowments, the scholarships are at a record high in its university's history, with at least one quarter of the students on scholarship. The university also managed to increase openings for graduate assistantships.

Students in private universities who struggled to access financial aid explained why the Lebanese University, the only public higher education institution with faculty campuses across the country, is not an option. They described the university as 'chaotic,' and that 'there is no clear exam schedule and no clear study plan; you never really know when you're going to finish.' Some students changed majors to better facilitate job opportunities immediately after graduation, or to reduce the anxieties of completing their program. A female student reported switching from engineering to English literature with only one year left to graduate, because of the distressing interactions with her professor. She explained: 'The crisis affected the attitudes of the professors. He would say, 'I don't care if you pass or fail my class, I'm barely getting paid.' It was very discouraging and condescending, and insulted us in horrible ways and kept relating it back to his paycheck.'

One associate professor explained how students who are about to graduate are at risk of wasting their investments in higher education, because they are at risk of dropping out. She was particularly concerned about the medical students, who have the highest tuition fees in her university.

Returning to the classroom

The universities in Lebanon are located in major cities; hence, students were largely concerned about transportation when on-campus attendance resumed. Students reported that many friends started carpooling. Some universities provided a network of buses for a nominal fee. In one university, students chose to live at the dormitory as a more affordable option than daily transportation. To cope with rising fuel prices, some professors said they moved their classes online. An assistant professor from a private university explained that the university allotted financial support for transportation. However, mandatory

attendance on campus created conflicts between faculty and students, because students could not afford the fuel prices.

Addressing emotional wellbeing

Students were eager to talk about the stress of uncertainty, change, and fear. With few exceptions, most universities limited their communication with their students during the crisis. Emails to students, faculty, and staff mostly reported on changes in tuition fees and teaching platforms. In addition to feeling in the dark, student anxiety was exacerbated further by the climate of insecurity. As one second-year student explained: 'I'm not sure...what will happen, will there be war? If the situation is bad, people will not stay silent. We're living today without knowing what tomorrow will bring. It's kind of scary. It's not just about the financial crisis. Everything is so expensive and we're always worried about corona. Mentally, I'm almost always somewhere else, especially when there is no protection.'

Nevertheless, some students reflected on experiences that helped manage their well-being. One common source of relief or comfort has been through the informal conversations with their teachers. "The professors have been sweet; a distraction from reality," one student at a newer university said. An associate professor claimed to have dedicated some of the online class time to share personal struggles, grievances, and even good news.

An opportunity to stretch boundaries

While most senior administrators interviewed described how their university had adapted to the compounded crises, rarely did they express opportunities for growth or expansion. In a media report by Kadi (2022), it was noted that the American University of Beirut and the University of Balamand are pursuing ventures to open campuses in Cyprus, as the Lebanese American University has moved forward to establish a campus in Iraq. In addition, universities with legal offices outside Lebanon have not only strengthened efforts to further build endowment portfolios, but also sought after institutionalizing online programs through jurisdictions outside Lebanon, such as in the United States.

An online video report⁶ described how students at the Faculty of Hospitality Management at Sagesse University transformed the annual entertainment dinner integral to their program into a virtual dining experience. It took place after the August 4 Beirut port explosion and during the pandemic lockdown and was dubbed as 'the first virtual restaurant in the world.' The students organized the event by setting up the dining experience in people's homes

⁶ For video report, see: https://fb.watch/eG78_LuSt1/. Last accessed on 2 August 2022.

where the guests watched the entertainment performances live through an online platform.

Building resilience

In conclusion, the four recommendations below are intended to generate discussions on how we can minimize the adversity of these compounded crises, while strengthening the higher education system to help it cope with future disasters.

Recommendation 1. Producing emergency response strategies

The development of emergency response strategies (ERS) is essential to building the resilience of any institution in the education sector. At the university, such initiatives can be incorporated within requirements set by the MEHE and accreditation agencies. Methods of writing ERS should capture input from all members of the university body, including students, faculty, and staff. Such strategies may even have tailored provisions according to the faculty or discipline of study. Planned responses should cover an array of emergencies that threaten campus closure, bankruptcy, and safety from armed conflict and infectious diseases, to name a few. Responses may now need to include provisions of remedial tuition for a lost secondary education, emotional well-being of its students and faculty members, pensions in volatile banking systems, closure of campuses, and building endowments.

Recommendation 2. Build knowledge on struggles for advocacy and transformation

The limitations of universities to bounce back or recover during crises are closely attributed to long-running challenges and struggles that placed them in highly vulnerable positions. The MEHE, civil society, and education researchers should work on producing more evidence of experiences and approaches and sharing them on public dialogue platforms. The Lebanese University is a case in point. Its history of sectarian-driven appointments, dysfunctional bureaucracy, and highly frequent strikes that disrupt coursework and exam schedules makes it a much less viable option for many students in Lebanon. The Lebanese University is a government institution that is plagued with unsustainable structures of governance, including corruption, as found in other government sectors. Nevertheless, the Lebanese University constitutes a significant portion of the public sphere for inclusive participation in cultural progress and stability.

Recommendation 3. Institutionalize support for well-being

Building on the mission of the Child Protection Unit at MEHE, a similar initiative is critical for faculty, staff, and students in higher education. The Directorate of Higher Education can produce and disseminate guiding principles and mandatory policies for the provision of emotional support during emergencies. The traumas of shock, instability, and uncertainty can significantly alter approaches to learning, teaching, research, and navigating crises.

Recommendation 4. Saving the Lebanese University

The administrative mechanisms at the Lebanese University require immediate reform. Sentiments from faculty and students consistently disclose systemic corruption across its functions, from selection of faculty and students to discrimination in classrooms. Any reform plan will need evidence from studies carried out on core components, such as governance, teaching, learning, and research. These are likely to require coordinated efforts with the Council of Ministers, when restructuring how budgets are set, expenses are paid, and strategic plans designed, carried out, and reviewed.

The crises that have plagued Lebanon in the past three years have significantly impaired the capacity and the functions of most universities. Indeed, responses to these crises demonstrated a system of higher education that is, by and large, as fragile as other collapsing sectors in Lebanon. Nevertheless, opportunities during these times of crises to break away from institutional barriers and pave new pathways for growth and inclusion may be closer than they appear.

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