
**Speech of the Rector of Antonine University Father Michel Jalakh
The Lebanese Universities: COVID-19 and More
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The 2019–2020 academic year was tormented by unprecedented events. It had actually barely started when a massive popular uprising shook the country on October 17, 2019, forcing the closure of universities for a period between three and four weeks. Both a reaction against the economic deterioration and a factor accelerating its outbreak, the uprising violently impacted universities, consequently troubling their timetables, priorities, and budgets.

Against all odds, the universities reopened in November, but the worst was yet to come. With the economic crisis only aggravating, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese have crossed the poverty line in a matter of a few months. With the devaluation of the Lebanese pound, the crisis that hit the banking sector, and the loss of tens of thousands of jobs, it was clear that the university sector would soon experience overwhelming transformations. It is expected, for example, that the number of universities would decrease significantly in the near future, and that the number of graduates who can enroll in higher education programs at the end of high school will drop as well.

Beginning February 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic further complicated the situation. The cessation of face-to-face courses and the closure of the campuses raised major challenges to the universities that are already struggling, in particular with regard to the sudden—and for some of them completely unprepared—transition to online teaching.

The universities had to rush the technical, administrative, and educational preparations and attempt to achieve, in the period of a few weeks, what the Lebanese government had not dared initiate for years, namely the commitment of the university sector to distance education.

This reluctance, formerly justified by the weakness of quality assurance mechanisms, was overcome under the pressure caused by the emergency. But emergency only implies compromise. Think of the quality of the internet connection or its cost, which has become prohibitive for families subsisting on modest incomes; think of all these instructors that embarked without preparation on a new teaching model that requires the modification of practices and standards; think of the credibility and fairness of the evaluation of learning outcomes provided by tools that are not equally accessible to all students; think of the practical lessons that require face-to-face engagement between instructors and learners or direct use of materials and devices.

The list of issues and challenges is too long to be entirely detailed here. And with the ambiguity that still surrounds the continuity of this experience, and the stand of online education with regard to face-to-face education, universities are condemned to face, each at their own expense and perils, the difficult scenarios that lie ahead in these times of crisis.

While the most expensive universities are opting to increase scholarships in order to prevent a drastic drop in the total number of their students, universities with moderate fees are already suffering from dropouts and unpaid tuition fees, noting that the latter are their main source of income. The

universities born out of profit would likely give up on higher education, which is no longer the greatly lucrative business it had been for the past few decades. As for the others—namely the Catholic universities—who are driven by the nobility of their mission, they will not give up, but will be preparing, as much as their capabilities allow, to cross the desert...