
**Speech of the Rector of Antonine University Father Michel Jalakh
Online Education without Social Distance:
Challenges for Internationalization and Culture of Peace
23–24 October 2020**

Honorable guests,
Dear colleagues, faculty members and participants,

I take this 4-minute speech as an opportunity to address some issues that are affecting the Higher Education Sector in Lebanon. The list of challenges and changes that have occurred in such a short period is too long to be detailed here. Yet, I will focus on three main dates:

1. October 17, 2019: Massive social movements in Beirut and the main Lebanese cities;
2. February 21, 2020: First confirmed case of COVID-19; and
3. August 4, 2020: Beirut Port blast.

The academic year 2019–2020 was tormented by unprecedented events in Lebanon. It all started when a massive wave of national protests shook the country on October 17th, 2019, forcing universities to close their doors for almost a month. Although the uprising was a reaction against the economic deterioration, it sadly accelerated the crisis and violently affected Lebanese universities by making a mess of their timetables, priorities, and budgets. The Lebanese pound has now lost 80 percent of its value. With the blocked access of depositors to their money in banks, the collapse of businesses, the loss of tens of thousands of jobs amidst political paralysis and the resignation of two governments, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese have crossed the poverty line in a matter of a few months. More than 55% of the entire population now live below that line. Hence, it was clear that the university sector would soon experience devastating transformations.

On February 21, 2020, the first coronavirus case was declared in Lebanon. The pandemic has led us and you —I imagine— to suddenly shift to online education. No need to discuss this further, as we are going through the same experience, but I must highlight the additional challenges Lebanese students are going through: the lack of adequate infrastructure such as electricity (yes electricity!), a bad internet connectivity, high costs of an online system with the need to buy tablets, laptops, etc. Moreover, we are suffering from the absence of a legal framework that regulates online learning. We lack a national agency for assuring higher education quality, in an ecosystem where there is one public university and 50 private higher education institutions, of which only ten hold an accreditation from an international quality assurance agency.

As if all the previous challenges were not enough, on August 4, 2020, a massive blast hit the Port of Beirut, further amplifying the multilayered crisis. This explosion reflects the negligence of the public administration, the failure of the ruling political elites, and the distorted confessional system of politics and administration that perpetuate corruption and nepotism since 1990.

Despite everything, I can't but conclude on a positive note: the more difficulties our students are facing, the more they are determined to strive for knowledge. Their persistence and resilience are keeping the flame of hope alive; hope for the better future they deserve.

Auguro a voi e a tutti i partecipanti gran successo. Grazie!