

February, 2020



# Open Dialogue on Lebanon's Education Sector

The education sector in Lebanon enrolls about one million students, out of whom almost 70% attend private schools, and it has expanded to reach a high primary enrolment rate<sup>1</sup>. However, this sector still faces many challenges among which are the shortage of teachers, high number of student drop-outs, a weak vocational education system, and high percentage of youth unemployment. Furthermore, the current deterioration of the economic and financial situation has taken its toll on the education sector, as many families have already started to transfer their children from private to public schools, and a number of private schools had to close their doors.

In response to the October uprising and its impact on the Lebanese education sector, a policy dialogue was convened at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB on December 3, 2019 to address some of the most pressing issues within the sector. This open dialogue convened key stakeholders working in the education sector and addressed some of the pending as well as emerging issues pertaining to the recent events that took over the country. A number of suggested actions were proposed that present a path for the development of the education sector in Lebanon. The discussion put forth an immediate response and a long-term approach to the issues addressed in relation to equity, quality education, access, financing across the sub-sectors.

It is important to note that this report presents an overview of the issues discussed in the dialogue by addressing key policy implications. The issues tackled are in no way comprehensive, and it is important to be followed by a series of in-depth dialogues.

## Equity and Access to Education

The issue of having access to data on student enrolment seemed to be one of the most critical issues addressed within the scope of access and equity. Evidence is important in order to address the implications of the economic crisis on the education sector. It is equally important to have a better understanding of the situation of private schools in light of the economic situation in the country. Understanding the scale of out-of-school children (OOSC) and school dropouts is critical in order to fathom the magnitude of the socio-economic crisis on the access to education among the vulnerable Lebanese population. Therefore, there should be applicable and practical recommendations and solutions proposed to address the issue.

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<sup>1</sup> The net enrollment rate was 84.35% in 2016 as per the statistics provided by the World Bank.

Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/lebanon/school-enrollment-primary-percent-net-wb-data.html>

It is important not to take numbers at face value, as some of the cases of shifting from private to public may be due to reasons beyond the economic situation, particularly at the secondary school level. It was also reported that the inability of vulnerable Lebanese children and youth to access educational institutions is linked to location of some of where these schools. Many families reside in areas where schools are distant, which forces them to have to pay for transportation, the latter becoming an extra burden in light of the socio-economic situation in the country. Moreover, there are families incapable of paying the tuition fees for private schools or even school fees at the public secondary school, where children are forced to leave school and work to support their families.

One of the problems further highlighted in the discussion was the overcrowding of public schools, which poses an impediment to the schools' capacity to accommodate the increasing number of new students. Additionally, securing education services for children with special needs emerged as a pressing need in light of the budget cuts on such services provided by the NGOs and free-private schools which usually receive financing from the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA). In this context, these children are at higher risk of dropping out of school due to the economic freight that their families have to undergo.

Finally, it is important to recognize that these challenges vary across regions and governorates in the country, presenting a further issue of equity in access and retention in school settings. Children who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and who live in certain regions of the country are more prone to being impacted by the current crisis.

### Quality of Education

Although access and retention are two important issues that we still struggle with in Lebanon, the quality of education provided in both private and public schools emerges as one of the most pressing issues, particularly in light of the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results 2018. The sector currently lacks a regulatory framework to hold education institutions accountable for the quality of education provided in both private and public schools. In this context, it is equally important to seek accountability and quality assurance in both private and public schools rather than assuming that education provision at private schools is de facto of high quality.

Early in 2019, a number of issues were unveiled in the authenticity of degrees granted by a few higher education institutions in Lebanon. These events revealed the quality gaps across universities in the country. The draft law for establishing a national agency for quality assurance in higher education, as per the decree number 8538/2012, has been in negotiations for the past 8 years despite the urgent need for a regulatory framework for higher education in the country and in light of the sharp increase in the number of private universities in the past decade. Addressing the issue of quality of education across universities in Lebanon is an investment in Lebanon's future generations. and a duty that we owe to the Lebanese youth and their families.

### Curriculum

Curriculum reform in Lebanon was last undertaken between the years 1996 and 1997. Despite ongoing efforts to reform the curriculum, there remain major challenges to moving these efforts forward. Nonetheless, at the start of 2020, the Centre of Educational Research and Development (CERD) launched a series of workshops to initiate the reform activity. It is recognized that the current curriculum is both excessive in its content and outdated. It also does not foster critical thinking, analysis, problem resolving, and citizenship values. It is also worth noting that reshaping the teaching strategies is also essential as changing the content of curriculum needs to be coupled by novel teaching methods. It is therefore critical to have close collaboration among the different MEHE and CERD entities, as well as the private sector and experts in order to not only move the curriculum reform forward, but to also set a clear vision and strategy for developing the sector.

### Financing

Lebanon spends 2.15 % of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education, the lowest among the MENA region countries. However, combined with subsidies to private schools (0.4 % of GDP) and private expenditures as parents' out-of-pocket share (1.45 % of GDP), the total education financing reaches nearly 4 % of GDP, which is in line with regional averages (EPER, 2017). Public expenditure on education is mainly spent on teachers' salaries, leaving little room for development. This is an issue that has directly impacted the quality of learning as little financing has been made available for supporting improvement attempts in the sector. Yet, despite the shortage in the financing of the sector, which has been further exacerbated in light of the recent budget cuts introduced by the government, there has been

a steady flow of funds to support the sector. International organizations have supported the Ministry in addressing the education crisis resulting from the large influx of refugee children into the Lebanese public schools since 2011. However, as the Syrian refugee crisis protracted, these funds were redirected to sustaining development and reform of the sector, which still benefit the refugees.

### Higher Education

Lebanon was among the first countries of the MENA region to establish a university in 1866. Since then, Lebanon's higher education sector has been leading in the region since then. However, the high autonomy among institutions and lack of accountability at different levels of the sub-sector led to significant changes and a fluctuation in the quality. The structure at MEHE, despite the different levels of accountability embedded within the existing system, render the Ministry incapable of regulating efficiently and effectively both the private universities and the Lebanese University. The disconnect between the education provided by the universities and the demand for skills within the labour market has also impacted the employability of the graduates of higher education institutions in the country. The youth unemployment crisis is not limited to university graduates, but it is also closely connected to the saturated workforce within the country as well as the weak economy, both of which push youth to emigrate seeking employment opportunities elsewhere.

### Policy and Action Recommendations

A number of policy actions and recommendations were discussed at the policy dialogue. Below are some **Action Recommendations** that could provide an immediate response to the current socio-economic situation:

- » **Mapping the current situation.** Mapping the impact of the current situation of the education sector begins with a proper tracking of the number of students. This process has already started at MEHE by issuing unique student IDs. This initiative started at the beginning of the academic year 2019-20 and is expected to provide further information on the student enrolment, grade repetition, transfers from one school to another or even the transition to vocational education. This action is essential in order to provide accurate information on the dropout rates and trends within the sector. Although MEHE collects data on school enrolment, it is important that it becomes public ally available and accessible so that effective and efficient interventions are made. In this context, this information becomes essential in critical times such as the current socio-economic situation in Lebanon, as this data could lead to understanding the trends that need to be traced and addressed accordingly.
- » **Reaching all children.** It is important to develop the capacity of educational institutions by providing education through online teaching and virtual learning platforms. Not only would such platforms allow a wider outreach to children, it would also further develop the curriculum into possibly interactive modules that would equip students with the 21st century skills needed for employability.
- » **Financing.** It is critical at difficult socio-economic times to reconsider the financing schemes currently available to support both the development and reform within the sector. Establishing an emergency fund-raiser that supports students in need, such as those unable to pay the tuition and/or transportation fees, is one of the mechanisms to do so. Partnerships with the private sector may also be one of the means to overcome some financing gaps, particularly for organizations that provide education for children with special needs.
- » **Career guidance and counselling and upskilling of youth.** Creating stronger linkages between the K-12, higher education and the labor market is crucial no matter how strained the situation may be with the ongoing economic crisis. These linkages can occur through partnerships between the higher education providers and the private sector for upgrading the institutional curriculum and making it relevant to the demand skills within the labor market. It is important to recognize that universities may now be struggling to meet enrollment targets given the weakening economy, however, providing such linkages increases the chances of employment of graduates both regionally and internationally, making higher education more relevant despite the financial challenges. To complement such efforts, it is important to mitigate the mismatch issue with an integrated career guidance and counseling program that would help support youth at an earlier stage to identify both their interests and the labor market needs to make better informed decisions of what majors to pursue when first joining the university. PISA 2018 results show that 8 out of every 10 fifteen years old students in Lebanon expect to work in a traditional job such as medicine, engineering or teaching at the age of 30. Therefore, it is critical that we align our labor market supply with the current demand through career guidance and counseling that begins in high school.

In addition to the action recommendations, there are a number of vital **Policy Recommendations** which may provide a longer-term approach to addressing development and reform issues in Lebanon:

The proposed policy recommendations address the issue of quality education and suggest ways to improve the educational system in Lebanon.

» **Establishing a clear vision and effective strategy for the sector.** There are efforts being made to improve education provision in Lebanon. However, if such efforts are not synchronized and channelled towards specific goals that would benefit the development and reform of the sector, then it is expected to experience duplication and little improvement. A sector strategy is surely needed to map the growth and development of the country by way of its education system. The sector strategy should be divided into sub-sector strategies, whereby specific goals and objectives are elaborated on the level of the basic education, higher education, and vocational and technical education areas. Developing the vision and strategy also presents a critical means to holding institutions, both private and public, accountable for their services. The vision should also establish an accountability mechanism for the financing in the sector which should ultimately lead to equity in access to education.

» **Establishing a national quality assurance agency.** It is vital that Lebanon moves forward the draft law to establish a national agency for quality assurance in higher education. Current committees and work modalities present a challenge for the Ministry of Education to ensure the accountability of the education services provided by local institutions. Such an effort also should be extended to schools as well as technical and vocational institutes. The agency should be an independent entity capable of making decisions without external interferences.

## Conclusion

This dialogue was held during an emergency situation in Lebanon post October 17, 2019. However, the resulting discussion presented an overview of recurring issues within the sector that may become more pressing in light of the ongoing crisis. A clear distinction between political and educational agendas is essential for developing and reforming the sector. It is critical to regain the trust in the education sector, whether private or public, in order to be able to achieve any plausible change.

### *Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut*

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB Policy Institute) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy-relevant research in the Arab region.

We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.



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### *The Education and Youth Policy Program*

The Education and Youth Policy Research Program aims at informing educational policy and promoting improved educational practices and achievement through an increased understanding of the issues of education in the Arab world and their impact on children and youth in the region. The program further aims at engaging in applied, policy-relevant research to help policy-makers make decisions based on best available information. The program will serve as a resource for government agencies and other institutions in order to shape the education and youth policy debate through evidence.

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