

Benchmarking Governance: A Tool for Improved Practices and Networking among Higher Education Institutions in Lebanon

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Since 1866, the Lebanese higher education sector has been continuously growing and changing, reflecting both the country's development and evolving educational needs. Concurrent with these local developments have been international developments calling for increased openness and transparency in governance at higher education institutions (HEIs). It has been concluded that measuring governance and quality of service delivery is central to improving education outcomes (World Bank 2013). In the past decade, the higher education has grown massively, which resulted in persistent concerns related to quality and relevance. Recently, there have been numerous local efforts to monitor the quality of education rendered by HEIs in the country. This paper addresses how university governance has been assessed in 29 HEIs, using an instrument that takes into account the underlying principles of transparency, openness, accountability, and voice and participation of stakeholders in decision making.

Country Context

Higher education is marked by the founding in 1868 of the Syrian Protestant College, now known as the American University of Beirut. This initiative was introduced by foreign missionaries, who also established other similar institutions. In 1953, the Lebanese University, the only public university, was established. In 1955, the governance and legal framework of higher education was significantly changed with the establishment of the first Ministry of Education. In 1961, the government passed the first law regulating higher education. It was then modified in 1967 to incorporate new licensing

procedures and regulations. The Lebanese government had indirect oversight of the universities and HEIs that were operating at that time through a number of national committees, such as the Engineering Practice Committee established in 1956, a joint committee in charge of the equivalence of all qualifications in both pre-university and higher education established in 1957, and the Examination Boards in Health Sciences such as the Colloquium Exams Committees in 1959. After the Civil War (1975-1989), which slowed down the activity of the higher education sector, the number of HEIs has increased, leading to an increase in the number of programs offered, enrollment, and graduates. This was coupled with the growth in student demand to attend higher education. Overall student enrollment in higher education increased 44.9 percent from 2003 to 2011; with 192,138 students enrolled in HEIs during the academic year 2010-2011 (Center for Educational Research and Development [CERD] 2011). Lebanon currently has 45 HEIs as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
CLASSIFICATION OF UNIVERSITIES IN LEBANON

Type	No.	Enrollment 2010-2011		
		M	F	Total
Public University	1	26,080	46,427	72,507
Private Universities (Licensed and operational)	31	61,780	50,646	112,426
Private University Institutes and Colleges	6	2,878	3,411	6,289
Private University Institutes of Theology	3	718	198	916
Private Universities (Licensed but not operational)	4	N/A	N/A	N/A

Sources: Ministry of Education and Higher Education (2012) and CERD (2011).

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The purpose of the first Ministry of Education was to establishing and regulating its central office, the Lebanese University, the directorate of elementary and intermediate education, vocational education, secondary education, and the programs on teacher preparation. The licensing procedures and other regulations introduced in 1967 to the Higher Education Law were further modified in 1996 and in 2007 to legitimize new institutions established. The Ministry was later changed into several ministries, to become what is today known as the MEHE, including a Directorate General of Higher Education (DGHE) established in 2002. There are also a number of governing bodies that regulate the sector.

Governance of Higher Education Institutions

Private institutions do not directly report to nor are controlled by the MEHE. However, there exists an informal relationship between the Ministry and the institutions, which permit them to enjoy a high level of autonomy and maintain a liaison that facilitates communication and cooperation. The support committees at the Ministry are charged by various supervisory roles, such as licensing and starting-up new programs or institutions and the recognition of degrees in private institutes. The Ministry has recently drafted a law for the establishment of a National Agency of Higher Education Quality Assurance (QA).

A number of initiatives were launched collaboratively between the Ministry and international organizations that led to the creation of a culture of QA. Lebanon viewed the issue of university governance as one of the key drivers of reform. This is in alignment with the global consensus that university governance refers to how universities define their goals, implement them, manage their institutions and monitor their achievements (World Bank 2012). Most governance models are defined based on the tension or balance between: the state, market forces, and academic excellence and the capacity to exert academic freedom. The World Bank developed a University Governance Screening Card (UGSC), which was endorsed as a Regional Arab League Initiative at the biannual Conference of Arab World Minister of Higher Education in December 2011. Governance at Lebanese universities, and other universities from the region, was measured through a multidimensional frame-

work, particularly focusing on: the overall context; mission and goals of the institution; management orientation; the levels of academic, administrative, and financial autonomy; accountability; and participation in decision making at the institution.

Overview of Participating Lebanese Universities

The participating universities were classified according to their status, their age, the type of research the institution undertakes, and the size of the university. There were two groups of universities, nine older universities dating from before 1960, and 20 universities established between 1988 and 2003. In terms of size, seventeen small universities host less than 3,000 students, five average universities host around 5,000 students, four large ones host about 8,000 students, and three larger universities host between 11,000 and 17,000 students each. Almost all students at the participating institutions are full-time students. Most of the participating universities reported that they are engaged in both basic and applied research, while few describe their research orientation as only applied or basic. Only four do not consider themselves as research institutions (Table 2).

Overview of Survey Results

The results showed that the Lebanese private universities are very autonomous, have clarity in their mission and goals, and relatively good use of results-based management (World Bank 2012). The results also showed that these universities have fairly low accountability and low levels of participation. Lebanese universities seem to be among the most autonomous institutions across the region as shown in Figure 1. The institutions have the autonomy to introduce new programs and to develop their curriculum and teaching modes. However, it is crucial to have internal and external accountability systems in place when institutions have such high autonomy levels. This is particularly significant in a country where private funds are one of the major sources of financing higher education like Lebanon. Private universities do not receive any financial compensation from the government.

TABLE 2
MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNIVERSITIES IN THE LEBANESE SAMPLE

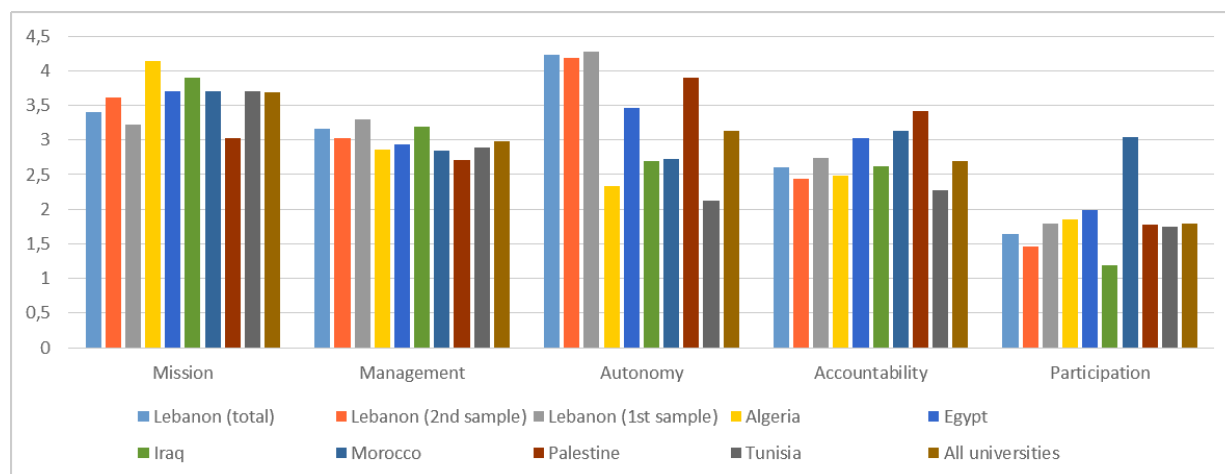
Status	Public	Private non-for-Profit	Private for-Profit	
	0	27	2	
Type of Research	Applied	Basic	Both	None
	4	4	17	4
Date of Establishment	Average	Range	Before 1960	After 1988
	1977	1866-2009	9	20
Number of Students	Average	Range	Smaller than 6000	Larger than 6000
	3,885	205-16,952	22	7

Source: World Bank (2013).

Therefore, students and their families carry the burden of funding higher education, while students at the public Lebanese University pay minimal registration fees. Low levels of participation across participating Lebanese universities may also indicate the need for

increased accountability. This participation is particularly highlighted in the engagement of major stakeholders at the institution, where students, faculty members and others take part in decision making within the university.

FIGURE 1
REGIONAL ASSESSMENT SCORES UGSC



Source: World Bank (2013).

Lebanon's decentralized system, where private universities enroll 63 percent of all students, seems to allow its institutions to have good management practices, as reflected in the UGSC. Private universities have been pivotal in developing good practices in quality assurance. The survey showed that many of the participating universities use modern management tools and have strategic plans in place.

Outcomes: Networking among Higher Education Institutions in Lebanon

Regionally, Lebanon has joined the network of 113 universities that participated in the study of the UGSC. A national taskforce of experts from five local participating universities was appointed by the Ministry and granted full authority to continue working on issues of governance locally. The Taskforce began to propose

national activities for the participating institutions. Among these initiatives is the creation of a national network of HEIs, in collaboration with the DGHE, to further develop the efforts put forth for improved governance and quality assurance. The universities have now started working on institutional action plans that they will convene to discuss the progress of their planning as well as to share best practices.

It has been quite fruitful for universities to get together at national professional meetings. This would in turn allow institutions to showcase their best practices and learn about innovations for improving other areas of potential strength. This exchange is particularly significant within the Lebanese context, as the culture of competitiveness has been very strong among the institutions particularly that they are mostly private. The engagement of many of the local of universities in the UGSC allowed for a common language of discourse among them.

Concluding Remarks

Universities in Lebanon seem to be well grounded in their institutional management and clarity of missions and goals. However, there is a need to have standardized mechanisms for the regulation of services which in turn coordinate a national quality assurance system. The universities need to have increased transparency in their day-to-day management and results in order to maintain the strong academic reputation the Lebanese higher education system has been well known for. It has be-

come increasingly challenging for graduates to find a job even a few years after graduation. Despite the challenge of employment, parents and students continue to invest in higher education. People continue to believe that investing in one's education leads to a better socio-economic status; however the current situation may change people's long held beliefs. Furthermore, Lebanon is no longer one of the few countries where people of the Arab World go for a higher education. Therefore, it is important to address issues of governance that have been highlighted through the UGSC as it strategizes the new plan for improving quality assurance, which will soon start with the launch of the National Agency for Higher education Quality Assurance.

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