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LEBANON

Minister unveils five-year plan to reform higher education

Wagdy Sawahel 27 January 2023

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Lebanon has launched a five-year higher education plan for 2023 to 2027 that aims to strengthen universities' social responsibility and competitiveness as well as producing industry and market-ready graduates, along with establishing a knowledge-based economy and achieving sustainable development.

The Five-Year Plan was launched by Lebanese Minister of Education and Higher Education Abbas El Halabi at a **23 January ceremony** for the International Day of Education.

Professor Bassel Akar, director of the Center for Applied Research in Education at Notre Dame University-Louaize in Lebanon, told *University World News*: "The higher education sector is in dire need of reforms, particularly its governance, quality assurance and the public university as shown in my October 2022 **study** titled *Surviving the Crises: Lebanon's higher education in the balance*."

Dr Aref Alsoufi, coordinator of the National Erasmus+ Office in Lebanon, told *University World News* that the plan is significant as it is the first strategic plan since the law for the organisation of the higher education sector was ratified in 2014.

"The five-year plan is timely as it comes in this period of multi-dimensional crisis that has been hitting the country since 2019," Alsoufi said.

With no president and a caretaker government struggling with a financial and social crisis, Lebanon is currently facing damaging political and economic uncertainty.

Professor Ellen Hazelkorn and Dr Tom Boland, who advised the Ministry of Education and Higher Education on the development of the plan at the request of UNESCO, said in a joint message to *University World News* that the publication of the plan "is a major achievement for Lebanon, and significantly recognises the huge contribution that higher education makes to economic development and innovation, and achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals".

"The five-year plan is also a significant achievement for the region, as Lebanon's geographic position is vital for regional sustainability and stability," added Hazelkorn and Boland, who are joint managing partners of **BH Associates education consultants**.

"The plan serves as an important demonstration to the people of Lebanon and to the international community that, whatever the current economic and political difficulties, the government is focused on the future social, cultural and economic success of Lebanon."

They said the key to its success will be the extent to which the universities engage constructively with the ministry on implementation.

The plan matches recommendations made by a **report** published by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation titled *Lebanon's Education System – Why reforms are necessary*.

Lebanon is a moderate performer in terms of its knowledge infrastructure. It ranks 29th out of 39 countries with high human development and 92 out of 154 countries in the **Global Knowledge Index 2021**, which measures knowledge performance worldwide, using seven main sectoral indices, including higher education alongside research, development and innovation.

Plan strengthens social responsibility

The **plan** focuses on three strategic pillars, including steering the higher education system and improving relevance and quality outcomes along with strengthening social responsibility and competitiveness.

Several priorities areas were identified under the strategic pillars including governance and accountability, quality assurance, funding, management, research development and innovation, doctoral education, teaching and learning, curriculum development and assessment, equality and justice, service to society and civic engagement, and internationalisation.

Seeking a diversified post-secondary system

In order to strengthen governance and accountability, several initiatives will be launched including developing an integrated and diversified post-secondary education system.

Asked what a diversified post-secondary system would look like in Lebanon, Hazelkorn and Boland said: "The key objective is to provide a range of institutions with different missions, ranging from those with a strong vocational orientation to those with a more academic and research orientation."

"In this way the skills needs of Lebanese society and the economy can more effectively be met and individuals [will] have access to a range of programmes best suited to their interest and competencies," they said.

"The ministry (or a national agency with responsibility for higher education) should develop an integrated policy approach across the post-secondary system with clear institutional missions, combined with easily accessible learning pathways from vocational and higher education and the reverse," they said.

"The ministry (or agency) could use funding as a mechanism to ensure clarity of mission and adherence to mission at institutional level. It should also cooperate with the agency with responsibility for quality assurance and the VET [vocational education and training] authorities," they pointed out.

Service to society and civic engagement

Explaining how the regulatory framework could encourage involvement of higher education institutions in service to society and civic engagement, as indicated in the plan, Hazelkorn and Boland said service to society requires a holistic commitment and engagement between universities and society, putting knowledge in service to society through teaching and learning, scholarship and research, collaboration, outreach and engagement.

"Examples of elements of such an approach include university-level engagement where universities work in partnership with other education providers, industries or business and civil society to develop a shared vision for social, cultural and economic sustainability, and develop initiatives to address common challenges," they said.

"Besides providing lifelong learning and continuing education programmes, student volunteer initiatives, as well as community-based learning (or 'service learning'), universities will also help local business (SMEs and large firms) to be innovative, develop new products and services and adapt to technological change along with engaging in collaborative research which addresses a community-identified need, validates community knowledge and contributes to social change."

They said universities will also provide consultancy, capacity-building and business and professional services, and technology transfer and innovation activities along with opening up their facilities and providing public services through cultural centres, museums, theatres, galleries, sports facilities and cafes.

"Universities will also help students to directly address the needs of local communities by launching their own community engagement activities, either via student organisations or through activism and advocacy initiatives," Hazelkorn and Boland said.

"Universities will also support learners of all ages, ethnicity, race, gender, citizenship status and talents to access and participate successfully in higher education, especially as people live longer, and change jobs and careers more frequently," they said.

Ensuring quality and justice

The plan includes setting a framework and regulations to ensure equality and justice in terms of parity in equity of access, participation, diversity and inclusion.

Hazelkorn and Boland said the challenges for achieving parity of access, participation, diversity and inclusion are in many respects the same for Lebanon as for other countries – economic, cultural and social.

"In particular, how does a country ensure that people from lower socio-economic groups are helped to, first, appreciate the value of higher education (as opposed to entering the workforce as soon as possible) and, when they do, how to support them financially to access it."

"Lebanon has the additional challenge of significant numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons," they added.

Lebanon, one of the world's smallest countries, remains the country hosting the largest number of refugees per capita. The government estimates that among the roughly six million population there are 1.5 million Syrian refugees, 90% of whom live in extreme poverty. In addition, there are about 13,347 refugees from other countries including Iraq and Sudan, according to **data** from the UN refugee agency UNHCR.

"To have any realistic prospect of addressing these major challenges there needs to be a clear strategy and plan with realistic and achievable targets," Hazelkorn and Boland indicated. But they warned that to achieve the desired outcomes will require commitment at the highest levels of government and in the higher education institutions and, of course, funding.

"This is a particular difficulty for Lebanon now – but it is an area which might be a prospect for international donors," they emphasised.

Under the plan, a model of performance-based funding for the Lebanese University, the only public university in Lebanon, and a strategic fund for all universities will be established for increasing funding along with monitoring performance.

New governance framework

A new governance framework for Lebanon's higher education system, a Lebanese Quality Assurance Agency, a Lebanese Qualifications Framework and a process for the recognition of professional qualifications will also be developed.

A sustainable system for the continuous revision and development of higher education qualifications in relation to the job market, a platform to connect higher education to the employment sector, to enhance labour market skills and employability, and to forecast skills for new and future jobs and professions will also be designed and implemented.

In addition, a national taskforce will be established to review all educational programmes, and a universities-economic stakeholders forum, a national system for academic and vocational guidance and a university or institutional research unit will be developed.

Besides establishing collaborative doctoral schools, centres for improvement and development in teaching and learning in higher education institutions, the plan includes the development of a national framework and regulations for internationalisation and global partnerships.

Furthermore, a national university-based research policy and strategy supporting innovation and development will be developed along with establishing national centres of excellence.

Plan criticised

Professor Akar of Notre Dame University-Louaize said: "There is very little reference to topical crises; the reforms-souze in the five-year plan appear generic, applicable to almost any context."

He said the plan made no reference to reforming the administration of salaries and operations across the campuses. "It overlooked any intention to improve learning and teaching through formal professional learning of instructors (eg, written qualifications) and the role of students in accountability measures."

He said the plan had been produced within offices at UNESCO and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education but there is "virtually no evidence of consultations with teachers or professors, and students".

Challenging contexts

Alsoufi of the National Erasmus+ Office in Lebanon argued that the plan will be challenged by the many adverse contexts, particularly the "deteriorating situation of the country at political and economic levels".

Another challenge is the extent to which Lebanese higher education institutions will take the plan seriously and contribute to its implementation, he said, arguing that there is a need for greater involvement of the higher education sector in the process.

"The international community should play a role in supporting the implementation of the plan, in particular the launching of its first-year phase," Alsoufi said.

Professor Hussin Jose Hejase, academic and scientific consultant to the president of Al Maaref University in Lebanon, described the plan as a "very serious, comprehensive, forward-looking and a complex multi-player plan", but "full of conflicts when [it is] going to be implemented".

He told *University World News*: "The ministry is entering a future conflict with other ministries with respect to several five-year plan programmes including qualifications, governance and regulating the Lebanese University."

"As for the ministry and the universities' requests for expansion or new programmes, there are double standards governed by those universities which consider themselves old [in terms of being in the market first] creating differences among several power circles, etc."

"One fundamental question arises amid the chaos of politics and the governmental lifecycle in terms of who is the champion of such a plan? When a new president is elected, a new cabinet is selected, and for sure the current minister pushing for this plan is out," Hejase concluded.

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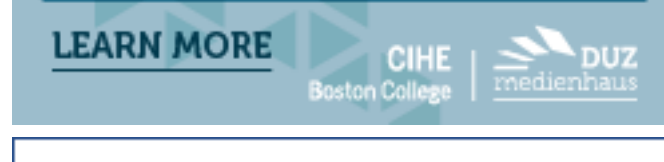
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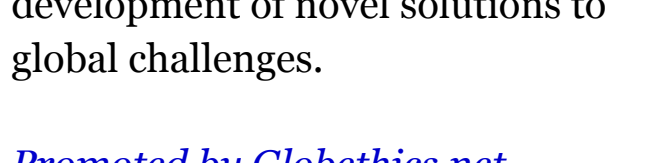
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