

Address of St Joseph University of Beirut at the meeting of Hope Leb European community project to assist Universities in Lebanon and MENA, 24th June 2021, Zoom meeting.

I would like to thank the leaders of Hopes Leb for inviting me to participate in this webinar and for giving me the floor to say a few words about the Association of Universities of Lebanon and the challenges facing Higher Education in Lebanon during this so difficult period of its political, economic and social existence.

Dear Friends, I start by telling you that the Association of Universities of Lebanon was founded on September 16, 2004 by 5 universities such as the Islamic University of Lebanon, Haïgazian, AUB, Balamand, the Lebanese University; then, Association was joined by 14 other Lebanese universities, so that the number is now 19 universities which enroll more than one hundred and fifty thousand students.

First, the economic and financial challenge that shakes up families' as much as educational institutions: almost all universities have adopted, especially with COVID, austerity economic plans in order to reduce their operating costs. Normally, we talk about the number of teachers who have left, but it should be noted that many students have emigrated or returned to their country. I am not talking about the large enough number of doctors who have left to work elsewhere in other countries, especially in the Gulf countries. Our financial assets are deposited in Lebanese banks and we can no longer unlock them. Some institutions have increased their tuition fees but this has created problems with the students and they have been forced to bring in external funds in order to be able to continue their academic mission.

For Universities with medical schools and hospitals are hit hard by the crisis and our University Hospital has gone through a difficult period on the one hand losing a lot of its resources for a whole year due to the health crisis where everything was centered on the treatment of patients of COVID 19; but here is the economic crisis and the instability of markets and supply, the solvency problems of private and above all public third-party payments as well as the continuous loss of purchasing power affect everyone, hospitals, doctors and patients. At the University, we cannot but be interested in a rise in wages, which we will decide in this meeting as well as a minimum rectification of the cost of credit in order to be able to partially finance deficits and debts. We are also continuing our policy of supporting our students, our *raison d'être*. Namely, those universities have chosen not to increase tuition or salaries so as not to lose more students and to increase their scholarship budgets.

Secondly, we must face the academic and organizational challenge of studies in a new year that I will call transition since there is a doubt that the return in person can be done in a total way in view of the risks, health, distance precautions, the need to continue a policy of economy and in view of the fuel supply problems. One of our nearby universities has adopted a 4-day face-to-face week to minimize operating costs. Likewise, it is a shame not to continue to have online courses given the benefits that this type of education has brought to digital education and training. We will discuss this during this council and adopt what is best for all.

The third challenge is psychological and social. In these difficult times, it is necessary to develop the right psychological means to support the mental and physical health of teachers and students who have been reduced by confinement and

by the social crisis; I would say that the goal of this crisis, which is the visible face of a conscious or unconscious conspiracy, is not to plunge us only economically but above all to break us psychologically and prevent us from carrying out our mission. That's why many universities have doubled the number of psychologists and study counselors to help teachers and students. With us at USJ, the two activities USJ en mission intended for extramural aid and Rise to bloom were selected by the Times Higher Education international ranking agency from among 200 universities as a project to support the university community in time of Covid 19. We will support this policy so that together we can face the present and future difficulties. The vaccination campaign continues to immunize our university community; 3 universities have acquired 320,000 Pfizer vaccines to immunize their university communities and teachers and students from other universities.

It is true that our university has a national and even a political role in order to orient or reorient policy towards its pure notion of service to the community and the formation of our young people for citizenship.

Finally, the struggle is continuing. Higher Education in Lebanon and the historical one must be stand up and ready to take on challenges; HE is not marginal or an addendum to the life of our nation but it has to build the future of Lebanon, especially in these moments of crisis.