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Pursuing Internationalization in Times of Persistent Crisis

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Crisis management is a key component of successful international higher education management. Yet, the resources on how to pursue internationalization in regions that experience persistent national, economic, and social crises are scant. Through the example of Lebanon, this article seeks to show how countries facing multiple structural and long-term crises can pursue internationalization by looking for and then focusing on opportunities.

A COUNTRY IN CRISIS

Over the past 2 years, Lebanon has faced multiple crises. In October 2019, months before the COVID-19 global pandemic broke out, the country was thrown into disarray resulting from governmental and economic policies leading the state to declare bankruptcy, a vastly overvalued national currency pegged to the U.S. dollar, and the collapse of the Lebanese financial system and banking sector. As a result, the country experienced extreme inflation and a sharp rise in poverty and unemployment, with the rapid de facto loss of the Lebanese lira's value reaching 90 percent. There were historic protests in which many students took part, which led to the resignation of the government and promises of reform—promises that, nearly 2 years later, remain unfilled. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Lebanon in March 2020, it halted protests and added to the national crisis as strict lockdowns prevented many residents from earning even the most basic living wages. To make matters worse, the Lebanese private banks ran out of U.S. dollars and unilaterally refused to allow depositors to withdraw their U.S. dollars, instead forcing them to withdraw a limited monthly amount of savings in Lebanese lira at a greatly reduced exchange rate.

By summer 2020, the economic and financial situations had worsened to such a degree that even relatively privileged private universities such as the American University of Beirut (AUB) declared concerns regarding financial instability, faculty retention, and support for students' families whose incomes had plummeted. With the official U.S. dollar equivalence effectively dismantled, AUB was now forced to charge student tuition—which accounts for the bulk of its revenue—in the national currency that had lost most of its value. The university has since secured approval from its Board of Trustees for a plan to leverage significant resources abroad to invest in retaining faculty and staff (Khuri 2021).

Then, on August 4, 2020, an explosion occurred in a warehouse in Beirut holding 2,750 tons of unsafely stored ammonium nitrate, causing a two-week state of emergency. This had a severe impact on Lebanese society, causing a demoralized national and collective state of mind as well as further economic stress and displacement.

Meanwhile the decade-long war in neighboring Syria has resulted in more than a million refugees residing in Lebanon, which is among the highest per capita refugee hosts in the world (UNHCR 2021). Additionally, Israel continued

to deploy planes and drones in violation of Lebanese sovereign airspace. All of these circumstances accelerated a brain drain as many of those who could, including students and professionals working at universities, simply left the country.

On June 1, 2021, the World Bank wrote, “Lebanon is enduring a severe and prolonged economic depression...the economic and financial crisis is likely to rank in the top 10, possibly top 3, most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century.” This official confirmation of what the Lebanese were experiencing in terms of challenges related to inadequate policies and leadership added to the common sense of foreboding when it concluded that there was “no clear turning point on the horizon” (World Bank 2021).

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT TYPES OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Much of the literature about crisis management in international education focuses on how to deal with individual crises: how to manage and what to do in the case of, say, a terrorist attack, active shooter on a college campus, student illness, accident, or death. Such isolated crises have a relatively clear beginning, middle, and end. It is assumed that with the implementation of best practices, no matter how traumatic, the crisis will be resolved and there will ultimately be a return to “normal.” Individual crises may provide lessons to be learned or demonstrate to stakeholders and upper administration that international office crisis plans work effectively, but they do not offer other opportunities for systemic institutional change.

The literature on crisis in higher education also broadly addresses institutional issues related to slumps in enrollment of international students, decreased funding (Tight 1994), and more recently the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is more difficult to find literature on how to pursue internationalization amid

persistent national, economic, and social crises that countries such as Lebanon face. Rather than being time-specific and limited, these crises have long-term and pervasive effects on lives and livelihoods, everyday operations, and morale and aspirations of students, faculty, and staff. As the recent World Bank/CMI report shows, Lebanon is certainly not the only country facing such challenges, especially in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Marchesini 2020).

FOCUSING ON INTERNATIONALIZATION IN THE FACE OF STRUCTURAL CRISIS

Although there are various examples of internationalization in the MENA region, graduate employability is particularly low, with youth unemployment at 26 percent (Marchesini 2020); furthermore, the recent influx of refugees from Syria has placed extra strain on the labor market and the quality of education remains limited. The Arab Spring saw a decline in international students in the region, and universities such as the American University of Cairo (AUC) were particularly hard hit as they faced security issues, budget deficits, devaluation of their currency, and the collapse of foreign student enrollment (Leggett 2015).

Despite a perception of the MENA region as an unstable and unsafe destination, not to mention elevated travel advisories, universities around the world have expressed increased interest in sending students to the region—and to AUB in particular. AUB has worked hard to convey that the institution’s challenges are structural rather than individual and did so by (1) developing a clear and solid crisis management and communication plan to reassure partners, parents, and students and (2) broadening its visibility, representation, and outreach. In recent years, as more universities around the world expressed an interest in having a reliable partner in the Middle East to meet growing student interest in the region, AUB stands out in terms of providing a first-class education modeled on

U.S. liberal arts where classes are taught in English. Furthermore, it offers invaluable experiential learning for those who seek to engage in community service with refugees and other types of civic engagement.

Being able to offer such learning opportunities allows a university like AUB to pursue internationalization in the midst of persistent crises that cannot be isolated, nor resolved, but to which institutions can adapt and, when possible, find an advantage. The same can be said of the global pandemic, which has represented more of a structural crisis in that it has permeated peoples' personal and professional lives in terms of work, health, and travel; and yet, it has supported the adage that in the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity.

The Institute of International Education's recent *COVID-19 Snapshot* report confirms that the pandemic crisis has forced a rethinking of education models and created a stronger imperative toward internationalization, be it "at home" through virtual exchange programs such as collaborative online international learning (COIL) or via physical mobility (Martel and Baer 2021). Data highlight the positive changes in policies and approaches that universities have adopted since the pandemic—from innovative ways to attract international students to more flexible approaches to education abroad (Martel and Baer 2021). Universities need to be mindful of their local, national, and regional context in order to formulate viable solutions (Economist Intelligence Unit 2021). Three examples of positive changes—virtual teaching, affordable education, and perception management—deserve more attention as virtual instruction has reduced inequities, monetary devaluation has increased affordability for international students, and multiple crises offer an opportunity to (re)evaluate what matters.

Example 1: Virtual teaching and learning has leveled the playing-field.

The speed at which many universities around the world have adapted to the pandemic by turning to virtual teaching and learning has been remarkable, recognizing the added positive impact of significant funding that various foundations and grant agencies diverted into e-learning during this period. In particular, AUB joined forces with other universities to advocate for the active recognition of online learning in various Lebanese national parliamentary committees (there is no law on online learning in Lebanon), and being de facto online gave impetus to this initiative. AUB also made a strategic decision to adapt and capitalize on this situation by launching a series of online courses, certificates, and degree programs. AUB started going completely online because of the 2019 protests, which meant that despite the precariousness experienced in fall 2020 and early 2021 that negatively affected enrollments, a number of visiting and exchange students were retained by allowing them to attend virtually. The months that followed also presented the international office with the opportunity to push for the approval of virtual exchanges for AUB students. All of this has contributed to more comprehensive internationalization, not to mention more accessible and inclusive education for AUB students.

Example 2: Lebanon's economic crisis has resulted in a more affordable education for international students.

An unintended result of the dramatic devaluation of the Lebanese lira is that AUB is now significantly more affordable to regional and international students. The same applies to rent, food, transportation, and amenities that cost about 25 percent of what they did 2 years ago. This has allowed AUB to reposition itself regionally and globally as a more affordable destination for students seeking a U.S.-style education in the Middle East. This is especially important for international students who might be restricted from traveling to Europe and North America due to difficulties

in obtaining visas. Furthermore, universities around the world remain interested in partnering with AUB with the intention to resume exchanges once the pandemic is over. AUB students are also showing greater interest in studying abroad, and more faculty and staff are approaching the international office to express interest in international collaborations, networks, and relationships.

Example 3: Managing perceptions of crises has promoted continuity of operations.

During this period of multiple and persistent crises, it has been important to remain hopeful and focus on AUB's assets and strengths, including the quality of AUB faculty and staff, resilience, its reputation and credibility as a top-notch university, solid partnerships, and a robust crisis management and communication plan. (AUC took a similar approach during the Arab Spring when it focused on "business continuity.") Moreover, AUB draws large international and regional funding for education, research, and capacity-building, all of which have been capitalized on to provide sustainable support and prospects. From AUB's vantage point, and that of the students, the October 2019 protests constituted a teaching and learning opportunity rather than a crisis. It was the international office's job to communicate this to partners and to close the gap between the perceived risk and the actual risk.

LOOKING AHEAD

Although we have yet to understand the long-term impact of the global pandemic, it is more evident than ever that there is no-one-size-fits-all solution in internationalization. As we know only too well from our own experiences in Lebanon and the MENA region, persistent crisis forces change and adaptability. We should continue to offer in-person experiences while making it possible for students who want to learn virtually to do so as well. Faced with

challenges that predate the pandemic, universities in the MENA region, where internationalization remains limited in scope and driven by the imperative to transcend physical obstacles and financial constraints, had already begun adapting (Marchesini 2020). The pandemic has accelerated this drive to collaborate with partners nationally, regionally, and internationally and provide students with virtual global experiences. Global challenges such as climate change, global pandemics, increased nationalism, and geopolitics continue to bring the international education community together in search of mutual solutions for a more sustainable future.

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