

# **Oxford Round Table**

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## **Performance, Quality and Institutional Efficiency A Recent Experience**

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## **Background**

The aim of this paper is to present the experience of a newly established university, the University Of Balamand (UOB). The University had to meet the requirement of Excellence in Education, as stipulated by its Board of Trustees. Its administrators had the task of fulfilling this mission within the Lebanese educational system, and under the constraints emanating from Lebanon's internal war (1975-1990). It was not an easy task to build such a university under those conditions.

After presenting the challenges the UOB had to face, the methods of work that were adopted, and the way we are trying to overcome the difficulties and failures, I will conclude by suggesting some ideas issuing from this experience.

## **The Higher Educational System In Lebanon**

Lebanon has both trends of private and public universities. While there is only one public university, the Lebanese University, with its 47 branches spread throughout Lebanon, there are 43 different private institutions of Higher Education. These institutions are not all universities. Some are only specialized "institutes" in one field of study; others are "technological institutes" aiming to fill the gap between the university level and the market needs. Only 19 of the 43 institutions are universities, of which 7 only were founded before 1996. UOB is one of these seven universities. Two of these universities were founded at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 3 between 1930 (UOB, through one of its faculties is one of them) and 1960, and the two others in 1961.

Even if the higher education tradition is 125 years old in Lebanon, we still have no quality system. Higher education institutions are not subject to any type of peer assessment or accreditation procedure. A 1961 law gave the guidelines for organizing the Higher Education system, but it was only in 1996 that a decree specified the academic and institutional norms for founding a new institute of higher education. For the time being, no peer control procedure is operational. This is why we are now dealing with a totally new situation: On the one hand we have well established nonprofit institutions (mainly universities), trying to maintain a high quality of education, and on the other, we have the new institutions with an entrepreneurial approach implementing a less demanding type of learning.

## **Impact of the Lebanese War**

This new situation is probably one of the indirect impacts of the Lebanese internal war. Political confusion, confessional tensions, lenient policies in education, created, at the beginning of the nineties (between 1992 and 1996), a "fait accompli" of several

institutions that became recognised as institutions of higher education. But even after the new decree of 1996, it had become impossible to stop the emerging of profit-based institutions that had specific political support. Only three months ago, the Ministry of National and Higher Education took new plan to entailing unqualified institutions.

The main impact of the war was on the quality of education and decided to implement the type on training we were offering in our universities. The exodus of qualified professors (Lebanese and foreigners), the difficulty to maintain research, the near impossibility of recruiting new PhD graduates, were determinant factors in the tragedy of Higher Education in Lebanon. But, again, I have to reiterate that because of the de facto “cleavage” in the Lebanese population, each university found itself with a specific majority of students and faculty belonging to a specific religious confession. Sometimes this was even targeted for ideological reasons. It was in this atmosphere that the decision to launch the University Of Balamand was taken.

### **The New Born University of Balamand**

UOB was launched by the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and was officially founded in June 1988. It was born by the merging of two existing higher education institutions: the (Académie Libanaise des Beaux Arts [1936] and the Saint John of Damascus School of Theology [1970]), by adding a new Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

Because of the its Fine Arts and Theology Faculties, UOB was not considered a new university of higher education in the Lebanese context. But in fact, it was totally new for the following reasons:

- أ. UOB was the first university in Lebanon, with a main campus not located in the capital or in its vicinity.
- ب. UOB was the university in where the different religious confessions felt at home.
- ج. UOB took a strong position in regarding Lebanon as a unified, free and final country for all.

Being launched by the Orthodox Church did not in any way obstruct the aim of the founders, which was to create a new higher education institution working for a new Lebanon.

### **The University Mission and its Challenges**

As a matter of fact, launching such a university was not an easy decision. In 1988, the political, financial, and security reasons, caused such an action to be a great risk. But, at the same time, with the ongoing struggle in Lebanon, founding such a university was itself a message. Somebody had to say that there is another way out of this war, and that living together was possible. This is why; the newly born institution had a mission with three different and complementary objectives: Academic, social, and human.

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## **Academic Excellence**

The first objective of UOB, as defined by its Board of Trustees was “Excellence in Education”. Being a newly established university, we had to avoid the traps created by the war all over Lebanon. Located in North Lebanon, far from the fighting theater, we had to be able to attract competent candidates not only from Lebanon, but also from abroad. We had the difficult task of creating an appealing atmosphere for qualified professors and of proving ourselves to be serious enough to attract the good students. We, not only had to “compete” with universities that were established some 120 years ago, but we had to operate in difficult logistic conditions imposed on us by the war.

## **Social Involvement**

The second objective of our mission was a social one. The university, in 1988, had to deal with a divided society, from which the unifying role of the government was virtually absent. “Community service” to us is as important as the academic one. Trying to put people together, trying to involve students in the life of the civil society, trying to make the whole community rediscover the essence of political involvement, were tremendously important issues for us. We had to link our academic plans with the social involvement of the University.

## **Human Endeavor**

On the other hand, the war years had their impact on the behaviour of our students. Some of our 18 year old students had never visited the Capital of their country, 80 Km from their home, and were only exposed to one-sided orientation. The third objective of our mission was to implant in our students the ideas of love, of tolerance and of the acceptance of the other. Here also, our task was to enhance these ideas without violating the academic freedom of our faculty and our students.

## **The Challenges of the University**

Having this mission in mind, UOB had to face many challenges at the same time. Questioning our priorities, we opted for a “total priority” policy. Everything was important and immediate. We knew, from the outset that we will not be able to succeed in all the fields. But we were aware that an integrated approach to the different objectives was our only way to overcome the difficulties. We based our approach on a solid academic background using it to respond to the different challenges and to meet the requirements of our objectives.

## **Keeping Fees at a Reasonable Level**

The main obstacle was the financial burden. As a private university, UOB can count only on two sources of income: fees and private support. Because of the war and the financial situation in the country, student fees can never be sufficient to cover the expenses of building a university on the Anglo-Saxon model. Our financial policy was and still is to have reasonable student fees with a very aggressive policy for financial aid to needy and deserving, plus student employment. Support came from the Board of Trustees from donors friendly to the University from different religious committees. Each building in

our rapidly growing Campus carries the name of a philanthropist.

## **What We Did**

I shall not be long in presenting our actions. But I think it important to state the plans we implemented, and are still implementing to respond to the challenges that I had mentioned. This will help in assessing our experience and the results of these 13 years of work, keeping in mind, that after 13 years, UOB has now 9 faculties and one Institute of Technology.

### **Academic Level**

We decided to make the academic status of the UOB, the backbone of our policy. Accordingly we emphasized its quality and uniqueness. We did it at the following three levels:

#### **Rules and Regulations**

In terms of rules and regulations, we opted for a credit system, based on a (3 + 2 + 3) graduation output, leading to a BA/BS, MA/MS PhD degrees. The requirements for graduation are demanding. We are one of the few universities in Lebanon where entrance exams are a must in all majors. Even if the curricula's design allows for some flexibility, it is still a very strict one, and is in total accordance with the main trends in the American and European systems of higher education.

#### **New Faculties and Majors**

As a new university, we were aware that we are going to establish new Faculties required by the new generation and the emerging market in Lebanon and the Arab countries. At the era of globalisation, we had to prepare our graduates to compete with graduates from all over the World and not only in the local arena. We decided to develop our Faculties and majors having in mind the two following priorities:

١. Any new Faculty had to address new majors, not offered in other universities in Lebanon. This was the case for example in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, where we were the first to offer a BA degree in Elementary Education, in Library Science and in Physical Education, and an MA degree in Clinical Psychology. It was also the case in the Faculty of Engineering, where we were the first university in Lebanon to offer an MS degree in Computer Engineering, and in aeronautics engineering.
٢. In more classical majors, we decided to offer sub-majors in areas not covered by the regular curricula offered in Lebanon. This was the case in the Faculty of Health Sciences, where a BA in Health Education was offered for the first time in Lebanon. This was also the case in the Faculty of Engineering where a sub-major in Environmental Engineering was offered in Civil Engineering and Robotics in Mechanical Engineering.

We have now 9 Faculties (we had 3 at our founding 13 years ago). The curricula of these Faculties cover 30 different majors and offer 42 different degrees.

## **Curriculum Design**

A special attention was given to curriculum design.

- أ. University requirements are an integral part of the curriculum. These requirements do not cover only language and computer skills but they include also what we call “Civilization Sequence” program, compulsory to all our students and covering Ancient and modern heritage along with an emphasis on Christianity and Islam. We are aware that Lebanese youth must learn about each other to overcome the barriers imposed on them by the war and by ideological partisan.
- ب. Relating some courses to the service of the community is a policy of the UOB curricular approach. Students are offered free credits in arts, education, computer, engineering and language courses, when, under the supervision of their instructor, they link the content of the course to a block of 45 service hours in the community. These service hours are course related and totally integrated in the course content and in the evaluation procedure.
- ج. Giving our graduates some flexibility in their future career was also one of our main concerns. We gave room in the different curricula to a “minor”. The student may graduate in a specific major with the mention of a minor in a different area.

All these curriculum features gave UOB a specificity, which we think is beneficial to our graduates. Establishing a new trend in teaching accompanied these efforts, because a change in the curriculum is not a goal in itself. This is why we are trying to move to a student-centered approach, to a better use of new technologies in teaching and to evolve the awareness of students to their own role in the learning process.

## **Faculty Recruiting**

To meet the requirements of this ambitious planning, we had to adopt an adequate policy of recruitment. We were aware that we would not be able to compete in financial considerations with other universities. This is why we tried to create at UOB a friendly atmosphere of transparency, and effectiveness. Being a young university, especially in the new Faculties, building the future was a challenge for the newcomers who joined the core group of founders, and the administrators had to meet the scientific requirements of the faculty in terms of labs, new technologies use, and international contacts.

We backed our Faculties with state-of-the-art labs and workshops, thus helping them to maintain research plans they already have with the foreign universities. Policies for such cooperations and participations were put and many agreements were signed with American, Australian and European universities. This was rewarding for both the faculty and for the UOB as such.

## **Low Staffing**

To maintain a financial equilibrium at the University, we had also to make a choice in terms of administrative staffing. We opted for a “low staffing” policy, backing up offices,

labs and workshops with an aggressive “student work” presence. Students in the different University departments perform the equivalent of 24000 working hours/year. For the time being we think that the advantages of such a policy (for students and for the administration) are still greater than the main disadvantage we face (mainly in the offices) during some specific periods of the year.

### **Creating a Campus Life and Student Centered Facilities**

Only two universities in Lebanon have the tradition of a campus life. Both are located in Beirut. Implementing such a tradition in North Lebanon was a challenge as north Lebanon is not accustomed to campus life. We adopted different action plans:

- أ. Designing a most pleasant campus, in terms of friendly atmosphere, landscaping, and student awareness of belonging.
- ب. Establishing an Office for Students Affairs, in charge of the many aspects related to non-academic issues in students' life.
- ج. Creating several different student clubs, involving various activities, to link the students with non-curricular aspects of the campus life.

On the logistic side, these plans required UOB to design the proper campus to host such activities. On a piece of land of 500 000 square meters, offered by the Orthodox Church, the different buildings were erected and named after their respective donors. For the time being we are putting the final touches to a futuristic master plan based on the academic requirements of the Faculties.

### **Difficulties we are facing**

“When there is a will there is a way”. This proverb is true, but it does not mean that the way will be easy to find. During these 13 years, we faced many difficulties and we had many failures, even if we consider that all in all we achieved a lot.

### **Human Resources**

The first difficulty we face is related to human resources. In a small country as ours, it is not always easy to find the proper person for a key position or for a special program. We prefer to leave a position vacant than to fill it with the not so appropriate person. Such a void can be harmful sometimes for the whole institution. The "uncertainty" of the near future of the region is playing against us, not to mention the limited financial resources at our disposal.

On the purely academic side, we try to fill the gap by using the academic relations we are having with sister institutions in the USA and in Europe. Visiting professors, exchange of faculty, special training for graduating students are some of the options we have. But it is more difficult to fill key positions in academic administration.

### **Implementing New Trends**

The second difficulty we face is in implementing our choices in teaching and learning. The education environment in Lebanon is more inclined to classical models. The majority of instructors were trained in traditional schools. Even students prefer textbook oriented methods of teaching. The new trends we opted for are neither familiar nor popular. We

have to work hard on many fronts to create this tradition, and we need external expertise to lead workshops to help in rooting our obsolete teaching and learning habits.

### **Making a Rapid Social Impact**

On the other hand, even if the UOB is very well received in the community, its social impact has not yet gone as deep as we had hoped it would. Projects like the “Continuing Education Program”, which we had tried to implement several years ago, are still weak. Some fundamental changes have to take place first. All our artistic activities, non-curricular programs, special cultural events are open to the public. We hope that this will become fruitful in the near future.

### **Creating a Continuous Campus Life**

Another major difficulty, related to the previous one, is the lack of a continuous campus life. Even with our 1800 students on campus, we failed so far to create campus life which goes beyond the class hours. Only students living on campus and university sports teams use the excellent facilities that are available. We hope that with our master plan, more facilities will be offered to the community, making the whole campus friendlier to our surrounding environment.

### **Marketing the UOB**

Last and not the least, is the issue of marketing the UOB. Our programs, our faculty, our campus, are one of the best in the country. Every one who gets to know us better, appreciates a lot our performance as a young university, whose graduates do well in the market and in graduate and post graduate studies. But we have failed to make ourselves known in a broader area. It is probable that we did not invest enough in marketing.

### **Where We Are Improving**

We have held brainstorming sessions, official meetings of committees and boards, which helped us plan for future improvements.

### **Assessing Our Work Using External Expertise**

Perhaps as a first in Lebanon external expertise was sought to help us in academic and administrative matters. Sister institutions were very helpful in sending us teams of colleagues to evaluate our strengths and our weaknesses. Three main reports were written for this purpose and were studied in the University Council. These reports helped us to design some changes some of which were quite drastic.

For the time being we are working on establishing an internal audit system in order to seek accreditation in the near future. Such accreditation will be available soon in Lebanon and within the Arab Universities. But we hope that we'll be able to ask for accreditation in Europe and in the United States as well.

### **Developing External Relations and Academic Cooperations**

Another main improvement we are working on is developing the academic relations with foreign universities. This development does not aim only at the official recognition of



agreements regarding students and faculty exchange. The main purpose will be the implementation of double sealed diplomas based on recognised curricula backed by a solid partnership in teaching and research.

This development will also give us the possibility to fill gaps due to our limited financial resources. It will give our graduates the flexibility to move to such sister universities for postgraduate studies without any loss of credits and time. It will also offer a chance for our faculty to pursue their research in specialised labs, and on up-to-date topics. Such cooperation will enhance our academic performance and will create more confidence in UOB both internally and externally.

### **Developing Participation Policies in Decision-making**

From our experience in sharing, and after the unexpected growth of UOB, we considered that it was time to introduce a new spirit into the university governance. Without changing the constitution or the bylaws, we began developing a participation strategy. We prepared internal bylaws for the Faculties creating different committees, which will be part of the decision making process. We created a senate where major decisions and policies are prepared and discussed. We established students committees within the student body to be in charge of students' life.

We hope that such developments will help a lot not only in overcoming some of our difficulties but also in meeting the objectives of our mission.

### **Conclusion**

Having the chance, the opportunity and the honour of being at UOB from the very beginning, I shall conclude with the followings:

- أ. Having a vision for the University was of an utmost importance. Without such a vision, we would not have been able to accomplish what we did.
- ب. Being fully supported by the founders of the University, especially His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius the Fourth, chairman of the Board of Trustees, was a unique opportunity for the UOB administrators. This support was not only a financial one, but also a human and moral one.
- ج. The international relations of the UOB were tremendously important. These relations allowed us to strengthen our curricula, to keep our faculty up-to-date, and to give UOB an active presence on the international scene.
- د. New universities have to build on solid academic basis. In the globalisation era, quality is more demanding and only respectful institutions will be able to compete at the scholarly level, which is the level to aim at.
- هـ. Marketing is important, and some entrepreneurial aspect for the institution is a must. Marketing, however, must serve the academic purpose of the university, and must enhance its educational mission.

I hope that this special experience of helping in launching a university in a war setting, in a developing country, with limited financial means, but with a clear mission statement and serious human commitment is of relevance to the proceedings of this round table.

Thank you.