



# The Migration of Students in University and Pre-University Education between the Public and Private Sectors in Lebanon



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Since the late 2019, Lebanon has been witnessing a financial and economic crisis, to which was added a global health crisis in early 2020 (the Covid-19 pandemic). These crises have severely affected the situation of university and pre-university education given the depreciation of the of the national currency, which has lost more than 96 percent of its value since the beginning of the crisis.

A review of students' enrollment in most private universities for the current academic year 2022-2023 indicates a remarkable increase in the number of their students, contrary to what was expected and despite the stifling financial crisis (the increase ranged between 30% and 40%). A significant percentage of this increase can be attributed to a variety of reasons, perhaps most importantly the open strike at the Lebanese University, which prompted many middle-class students in particular to go to private universities that attracted this category of students through aid programs and financial grants, some of which reached 100 million US dollars and covered between 50% and 75% of its students. Other universities also adopted a flexible mechanism for paying the tuition fees in monthly installments throughout the academic year, and giving long-term loans that students work to pay off after entering the labor market. The value of tuition fees in private universities have also declined significantly compared to the years prior to the financial crisis, despite that part of them is dollarized, so that they are paid at a very low exchange rate compared to the exchange rate on the black market.

In fact, the available statistical data prior to the outbreak of the crisis clearly show an annual decline in the number of students at the Lebanese University, specifically since the academic year 2017-2018. This decline continued throughout the following two years, i.e. 2018-2019 and 2019-2020: from 37.6% to 36.9% then to 35.7%, and it seems that this downward line is still persisting despite the aggravating financial and social crisis.

It should also be noted that the adoption of distance education almost entirely at the Lebanese University since the beginning of the crisis and for three consecutive years, has in turn contributed to the migration of many students to private universities, which had resumed since the past academic year to compulsory in-person education.

The frightening collapse in the purchasing power of the members of the teaching and administrative staff at the Lebanese University and the huge drop in the university's budget (from about 250 million US dollars before the crisis to about 12 million US dollars after the crisis, i.e. a decline of about 95%) were mainly behind the failed resumption of face-to-face education last year. The Lebanese University still lacks, to this day, the minimum requirement to start the current academic year, as many of its faculties in different branches have not started teaching. The Lebanese University has not received any significant financial or in-kind assistance from donor countries or international and regional organizations, despite the strenuous endeavors to obtain it.

On the other hand, some samples of students' enrollment at the Lebanese University for the current academic year indicate a sharp decline in the number of those enrolled in the first years to the point that some majors were closed.

When analyzing the reasons behind the declining number of students enrolled at the Lebanese University, we must not lose sight of the issue of school dropout, since the beginning of the financial and economic crisis, and the fact that many students opted to work instead of going to university in order to secure a living, especially that they are all from the lower middle classes who make up with the middle class the "reservoir" of students to the public national university.

As for pre-university education, educational institutions have witnessed since the beginning of the crisis - whether in the public or the private sector - unprecedented pressures on the teachers and learners alike.

Statistical data show that public schools accounted for 31.9% of the learners (slightly less than a third) in the academic year 2019-2020 - that is, prior to the outbreak of the financial, economic and health crisis in the country - compared to 52.6% for private schools, 12.5% for private free schools and 3.3% for UNRWA schools.

With the aggravation of the financial and economic crisis in the country and the accompanying unprecedented deterioration in the purchasing power of the population, the pace of migration from private schools to public schools increased significantly in the academic year 2020-2021 reaching 4.5%, i.e. more than 47 thousand learners, whereas the number of learners in non-free private schools declined (3.34%), which means that over 35 thousand learners have left private schools as a result of the deteriorating economic situation.

However, in the academic year 2021-2022, contrary to what was expected, and despite the intensifying financial and economic crisis in the country, an opposite educational migration occurred this time, that is, from public educational institutions to private educational institutions, with the percentage of learners in public schools decreasing by 5.16%, or more than 55,000 learners, and the number of students in private schools increasing by 4.07%, or more than 43,000 learners.

This reverse migration from public education to private education in the past academic year is due to a number of reasons at the forefront of which the successive strike periods in the public educational sector (the number of teaching days in public schools in the first three months ranged between 20 and 25 days, compared to 55-60 days in private schools) with the entailed decline in the quality of education. Add to that the clear stumbling suffered by public schools given the sharp decline in government spending on public education and the difficulties related to transportation faced by the educational staff with the insane rise in fuel prices. On the other hand, many private schools have received a financial aid package in foreign currencies from donor countries and from local and international social organizations and institutions.

These data and statistics allow us to conclude that the future of education in Lebanon, especially in the public sector, will remain in a state of confusion and deterioration if no appropriate budgets are allocated, and if this future is not a priority on the agenda of any future government in Lebanon.

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