

## Social Mix in Higher Education

Dr. Adnan El-Amine\*

I felt like an outsider during my first week at the Faculty of Education, Lebanese University, in the fall of 1966. It was not that the class was big; it was just that none of my 15 classmates looked anything like me. None of them knew my village, Chaqra, in southern Lebanon. Neither did I know the hometowns of my classmates. They were from Kousba, Bishmizine (Koura district), Kefraya, Hasbaya, Tripoli, Mazraa, Achrafieh, Aley... Sunnis, Shiites, Orthodox Christians, Maronites, Catholics and Druze. And given that the professors also came from diverse geographical backgrounds and religious persuasions, diversity became the main feature of our classroom and of the Faculty of Education at large at the time. This diversity conferred on the class the warmth of differences of opinion and multiple viewpoints, and the curiosity to learn about others.

### Classroom Warmth

Birds of a feather often do not care about what their classmates, professors, or students say as much as they would expect it, and when they do notice it, it's usually either because one of them has conjured up an imagined different group and attacked it-and they applaud-or said something different-and they decry it. Birds of a feather prefer normative discourse. I did not realize the advantages of diversity and the dynamism it unleashes in a classroom until I returned as a professor to the Faculty of Education, in the 1977-1978 academic year, in that same building in the UNESCO area. The Lebanese University had expanded, and the place where I had studied was now called «The Faculty of Education, Branch 1». The scene here was now practically homogeneous: The staff were Muslims, the professors were Muslims, and the students were Muslims (95 percent). Branch 2 was now located in Al-Rawdah (Dekwaneh), with Christian administration, professors and students (95 percent).

The difference between a homogeneous class and a diverse class was later reaffirmed when I taught the master's program. The master's degree is offered in the building of the Deanship, in Furn al-Shabab, which is diverse. It is open to students graduating from either of the two branches. I recall choosing then the topic of religiosity (and measuring it) for education research methodology. In attendance were believers and non-believers, Muslims, Christians, Druze, nuns, political party members and non-partisan students. Whereas the bachelor's degree classes would tediously drag out, we were always short on time in the master's degree class because of intense discussions and enthusiastic participation, and the curiosity of successive discoveries of the variance in meanings—not only among students, but first and foremost between the facts and positions, on the one hand, and perceptions and prejudices, on the other. The blaze of these discussions would often spread from the classroom to the end of the corridor.

### Idea Generation

Mix of any kind is a boon for everyone—be it regional, sectarian, religious, social or gender. Segregation—all segregation—is a hindrance at the emotional and intellectual levels. Civilizations developed precisely through the intermixing of people, the intermingling, interaction and cross-fertilization of ideas. The principles of human rights, in terms of equal opportunities, or the principles of social justice, in terms of giving more to those who have less, are only



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guidelines for this idea of human mix and upholding dignity for the human person.

In the Faculty of Education, until the mid-1970s, the cafeteria and lecture hall were as important as the classrooms. This may be referred to as a «parallel curriculum». The parallel curriculum is free and open in production, application and modification to its actors, who include the students, professors and administrators. At that time, there were left- and right-leaning groups, both in terms of political parties and moods. There were conservatives and liberals, traditional and innovator. Male and female. From the same generation. Since students were full-timers thanks to State scholarships, they spent all their time at the faculty, between the classroom, the cafeteria and the lecture hall. In this mixed climate, there were meetings, interaction and cross-fertilization of ideas, and artistic, intellectual, political and youth trends, which would not have seen the light otherwise, were generated. This was

the beginning of the student «Awakening movement», which was initially formed by Christian students who stood up against the Phalangist Party and became a non-communist leftist organization. The movement got engaged in student union and national action and spread to other universities. And thus, arose new schools in literature and poetry, brought forward by the meetings and panels that flourished at the faculty. Later, from that mixed generation, the Association of Full-time Professors at the Lebanese University was formed. It gave the Association a mixed structure, defended it even during and after the war years, and helped it survive to this day.

After the division of the Lebanese University into branches, the new students at the university engaged in the new political conflict and the Students' Union of the Lebanese University (mixed) was dissolved—never to be re-created. So was the fate of the Awakening movement, which played a crucial role in its creation. The student Union was replaced by student councils formed separately for each branch. These councils inherited one another—with or without elections. Each branch now had its own parallel curriculum, inward oriented and repeating itself with slogans and events associated with the political party controlling the branch.

### Social Mobility

The mix of different social groups and categories tilts the balance of the agenda of the students, professors, and administration towards public issues. Isolation in a political group, with a unique identity, fuels the fanaticism of defending the rights of the group and reinforces the protectionism system. This is done at the expense of competency and merit criteria. The quality of education declines, and with it the opportunities for social mobility, that is, the opportunities of those who are lower on the social ladder shrink with regard to educational and social advancement.

James Coleman's report of 1966 showed how the black and white mixed public-school benefited black students more than segregated black schools did. The reason is that the social mix increases the chances of learning from peers. Similar results were found in a study on education and social mobility in the city of Saïda in 1980. An analysis of the distribution of students at the American University of Beirut (AUB) during the period in which the Hariri Foundation offered scholarships to low-income students to attend the university (in the 1990s) also showed that the population of the university had changed in terms of social class. In the same period, a study of university students in Lebanon showed that AUB was characterized by higher sectarian mix with Christian and Muslim students enrolled than all other private universities and the Lebanese University. I have no documented data on the state of universities today.

There are multiple initiatives to provide social mix today, and consequently social mobility. Several years ago, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education began to award full scholarships to students who excel in secondary examinations; this has had a similar social spillover effect. One of the most important «initiatives» is the so-called «unified faculties» at the Lebanese University. These are faculties without branches. Students are accepted by passing competitive examinations. To enroll, there is strong competition among gifted students. Thus, these faculties provide two types of social mix, sectarian and social. It is further evidence of the relation between social mix, moral openness, quality of education and social mobility.

These success stories are still limited in scope, especially that in the 2016-2017 academic year,

students of «unified faculties» accounted for only 4.7 percent of all students enrolled at the Lebanese University. But they merit consideration and examination of the opportunities to adopt their principles in the Lebanese State's public policies, whether in relation to private education or the Lebanese University.

### University Unifies

University in the Arabic language comes from the root *jamaa*, meaning «to unify». In Latin it refers to *universitas* and *universus* (whole, entire).

Since the 1990s, there has been a trend of private universities opening up branches left and right. As for the Lebanese University, it has seen a widespread practice to open branches and divisions in the regions, with the total number of branches and divisions currently standing at 68. This «servicing the audience» idea belies the meaning of the word university. Private universities that open branches are searching for clients (in the economic sense), and the Lebanese University is looking for clients (in the political sense).

In the private sector, universities go after their potential clients in their villages and towns. And offer them education «from the comfort of your home» and «at low prices». Whereas the Ministry of Education and Higher Education is keen on granting licenses and avoiding exercising control, currying favor with those who are seeking a service from those in power. Those seeking a service from those in power are either using universities for commercial purposes or for serving their own groups. At universities that target certain groups, the education of students is «facilitated» in order to provide social mobility for them, if available, from «within the same group» or to ensure for the production of the group's elites.

Instead of building a prestigious university complex in the north (or for that matter the south or Bekaa), where the Lebanese University would provide all the necessary facilities and equipment, attract the best professors, and offer assistance to low-income students from outlying areas, it is establishing branches in towns with the lowest standards. The stated pretext—the State is serving the people from outlying areas. The implicit explanation is exploiting this work politically, as evidenced by the huge political crowds and applauding what was opened. This is also an opportunity for politicians to appoint professors and directors of branches, enroll students, and win the loyalty of a region's people. It is a populist policy, if you will.

The university, after bringing together different people, must go on to create a new space in which students feel that they have come to a new world with new horizons. The university is not a higher-level school in the same environment. When a university gives out degrees, these degrees must have professional and intellectual value. The university is not a higher institute for technical education. It is not a specialty. It is a place where students pursue a specialty, and at the same time gain new knowledge and meet new people. It is a place that provides sufficient space in terms of time and place for students to interact with their peers in real activities (parallel curriculum), including getting to know the other gender. Absent that, how can university contribute to increasing its graduates' social capital compared to secondary school graduates? How can it contribute to social change?

\* Professor of education, Lebanese University