

Emerging Market Report – Lebanon

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The huge Lebanese global diaspora, estimated at between 15 – 20 million, against 6 million actually resident in Lebanon, is evidence of the long-established mobility, dynamism and entrepreneurialism of the Lebanese.

International mobility starts young for Lebanese. France is the dominant destination for Lebanese internationally mobile students, with the United Arab Emirates and the USA following, and the UK taking 6th place. However, according to UNESCO, the total number of Lebanese studying overseas has declined by 15% since 2008, and France in particular has seen an overall decrease in numbers of 17% between 2009 and 2013 (Campus France) . The number of Lebanese in the UK, however, has grown substantially, albeit from a small base – according to HESA’s latest data, the total number of Lebanese students in the UK has increased by 31% in the last three years alone.

So why is the UK bucking this downward trend? A lack of local capacity, the growing impetus and currency of the English language, an increasingly globalised employment market and perceived decreasing security at home appear to be the drivers, while post-study employment and the UK’s tuition fee structure, which often deter students from lower income countries, do not seem to be barriers in the case of the Lebanese.

Quality and capacity

Lebanon has one of the Arab region’s oldest higher education sectors, and is home to a number of well reputed universities, (QS ranks the American University in Beirut second in the Arab world, and the THE has the Lebanese American University as second in the MENA region), ensuring a ready supply of qualified graduates. Postgraduate degrees are therefore seen as key differentiators which enhance employment prospects, not only in Lebanon, but also in Gulf countries, where many Lebanese seek employment, and globally. However, despite the introduction of a number of new Master and PhD programmes over the last few years, demand for postgraduate study places continues to outstrip supply - only around 10 of Lebanon’s 31 accredited universities offer graduate degrees. This shortage of

capacity is likely to continue, in particular in medical and scientific fields. A closer look at the HESA figures shows that the majority of Lebanese students in the UK are postgraduates, and enrolments in taught postgraduate programmes surged last year, with an increase of 22% between 2012 and 2014. (In France, the number of postgraduates, the dominant group, has declined by 22.3%.)

English

In multilingual Lebanon, where Arabic is the official language, and 60% of schools use French as the medium of instruction, English has traditionally come a poor third. However, according to official sources, in 2015, more public school students have chosen to take their final exams in English rather than in French. This trend mirrors the increasing number of Lebanese universities now offering programmes entirely or partially taught in English. “The only public university, the Lebanese University, which is also the largest in Lebanon with around 36% of all HE students, has been traditionally a French-medium institution, but it’s also interested in delivering more programmes in English”, says Donna McGowan, Director of the British Council in Lebanon. International collaborations between UK institutions and Lebanese universities have already begun, and McGowan thinks there are further possibilities for the UK to work with Lebanese institutions to develop more collaborative provision – both to satisfy demand for English-language programmes, and to contribute to improving quality of provision in Lebanon.

This doesn’t mean that Lebanese are abandoning French altogether – many Lebanese are proud of their trilingualism. However, as Lebanon becomes increasingly connected, the language of the Internet – English – will naturally become more important.

The geopolitical and economic challenges which Lebanon has faced for a number of years push many Lebanese to seek employment overseas – helped also by the size and reach of the global diaspora. However, the desire to seek employment in the UK does not seem to be a key driver to choose to study here – since the tightening of post-study work visa regulations, the number of applicants from Lebanon has actually increased. The global currency of a UK qualification, and associated language skills, could well make the UK offer increasingly attractive to the globally mobile young Lebanese. “Due to perceived increasing insecurity, some students may be seeking a more stable experience overseas,” says McGowan.

Lebanon’s own universities charge relatively high (for the region) tuition fees – for example, a graduate interdisciplinary programme at the American University of Beirut can cost up to 28000US dollars¹, making the UK a competitive alternative. However, as the Lebanese government does not offer scholarships to study overseas, France’s nominal tuition fee structure in public universities will be an attractive alternative to many Lebanese. There are a number of UK scholarship programmes, including Chevening, the [Said Foundation](#) and the [British Lebanese Association](#), the number of scholars each year are inevitably limited in number. Indeed the BLA is doubling the size of its scholarship programme for 2016. “We have been vigorously developing our scholarship programme over the last year, including

¹ http://www.aub.edu.lb/units/graduate_council/Documents/Mastersinenergystudies.pdf and <https://www.aub.edu.lb/comptroller/Documents/docs/Tuition%20and%20Fees%20A%20Y%202014-2015.pdf>

the introduction of online applications. We have seen an increase in interest in our programme, and we are delighted to have doubled the number of scholarships available next year,” says Anthony Dawton, administrator of the BLA scholarship programme.

So, while France still dominates, despite its slight decline, and despite an increasing number of international study programmes available closer to home, there is an opportunity to take advantage of the shift towards the UK, towards the English language, and the unmet demand for quality postgraduate education.