

Beirut Arab University: A Case Study
Mohamad Bassam Sukariyah
January 2015

The Beirut Arab University (BAU) is a Lebanese private institution for higher education affiliated with Alexandria University in Egypt. Its main and original campus is in Beirut, but it also has branches and campuses in Debbieh, Tripoli, and Bekaa in Lebanon and in Alexandria, Egypt. BAU was established in 1960 by the late Egyptian president Jamal Abdel Nasser at the request of the Lebanese philanthropist group *Wakf Al Bir Wal Ihasan* (WABWI). Its creation aimed to balance the higher education landscape in the country at a time when it was dominated by two Westernized private universities, the American University of Beirut and Saint Joseph University. BAU sought to distinguish itself by affirming its Arabic and Islamic heritage and opening access to university to new groups of Lebanese (mainly Muslim) and Arab (mainly Palestinian) students. It is also committed to fostering cultural and scientific collaborations with other Arab and international universities.

BAU has ten faculties and a large student population: in 2009/2010 academic year 15,141 students were enrolled in all of its campuses and branches. Male and female students represented about 62% and 38%, respectively and Lebanese and non-Lebanese Arab students—about 43% and 57%, respectively. Its group of faculty members is a unique mix of Lebanese and Egyptian scholars. Professors from Alexandria University are often “lent” to work at BAU and the majority of full-time faculty members are from Egypt as are all deans and most department chairs. Plans are underway to increase the percentage of Lebanese faculty to 50% in an effort to maintain academic continuity in the country and to foster stronger involvement with local Lebanese communities.

As a private university, BAU has a relative autonomy from the Lebanese government. However, it is connected to the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education, which does not interfere in BAU’s academic and administrative affairs, but appoints its president and the members of its Supreme University Council (SUC). The SUC is the most powerful administrative body in BAU’s organizational structure. It is formed every year by a decree from the Egyptian Minister of Higher Education and is headed by the president of Alexandria University. Members are BAU’s president, secretary general, four members selected by the Alexandria University Council, and four selected by the WABWI group, which maintains the position of vice-president of the Council. The SUC has the power to make final decisions on strategic matters such as policies, regulations, budgeting, salaries, branching and construction, opening of new faculties, departments, or units, agreements with other universities and institutions as well as appointments of faculty members (after the recommendations of the university president and the departmental council).

Another important administrative body is the University Council (UC), formed every year by the BAU president who is also its director. Its other members are two vice-presidents from Alexandria University, two representatives of the WABWI group, and vice-presidents, deans, and the university secretary general from BAU. The UC is largely in charge of administering and implementing the decisions made by the SUC, and planning and making proposals to the SUC about matters involving hiring part-time instructors, setting the start and end dates of classes, approval of library regulations, and granting of university degrees.

Academic matters are administered on the level of faculty and departmental councils. It is also through these councils that faculty members participate in the university decision-making

process. Deans and teaching staff interviewed for this report emphasized that the Department Council is the most important academic unit in the university structure, because at least 90% of the recommendations it makes about hiring of new faculty members, teaching and curriculum, research priorities, and assessment are typically approved by the higher-level councils.

Faculty members report that they are generally satisfied with the academic environment at BAU, but there are areas that need improvement. For example, teaching staff (as well as students) need to be involved in the university decision-making process. Providing faculty members with continuing professional development, reducing teaching loads and course sizes, and offering better health and retirement plans are other areas for future enhancement.

Students are also satisfied overall with their experiences at BAU. Many appreciate the cultural Lebanese-Egyptian diversity of their professors and the fact that the university atmosphere is generally conducive to positive interactions and mutual respect between students of different backgrounds. This does not mean that there aren't occasional conflicts and tensions, especially among politicized students, or interventions from outside political groups. In order to maintain order and tranquility, BAU discourages students from engaging in political activities. Elections for a student council used to be held in the past, but they were terminated more than twenty years ago to avoid frictions and tensions on campus. Today, students are not formally involved in any decision-making structures at BAU and are not represented in any of the university councils, even though occasionally they may be invited to participate. However, students can have an impact through their evaluations of courses and instructors at the end of each semester. Also, in an effort to better prepare its graduates for the job market, the university administration is planning to open a Career Development Center.

Over the last decade, BAU has developed as an institution in several important areas. It has embarked on a major project of expansion and renovation. It has acquired new land properties in different parts of Lebanon and started building new campuses; it has also upgraded its existing infrastructure and equipped many of its buildings and libraries with modern communication and educational technologies. BAU has also made continuous efforts to ensure the quality of its programs and to be in line with current academic and professional developments. According to its president, the goal of the university in the near future is to obtain international accreditation for all its programs.

As one of the most respected universities in Lebanon, BAU is committed to cooperate and collaborate with other national and international universities and institutions with the goal to improve training and job prospects for its students as well as to increase research opportunities, particularly in the sciences disciplines. For example, its Center for Consultation was established in 1998 to foster links between the university and all sectors of Lebanese society. The Center is accredited by the Lebanese government to test imported medicine and by several international institutions such as UNESCO and the Microsoft IT Academy to provide training and award international certificates. BAU also maintains partnerships with the Al-Fikr Al-Arabi Institute, the Agency of Francophone Universities, and the Euro-Mediterranean University, and is an active member in a number of regional and international organizations and unions.