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Opening Speeches

Welcome address of her H.E. Ms. Donna Turk, Consul General of Lebanon — Dubai and Northern Emirates



H.E. Ms. Donna Turk

I would like to point out the fact that the forum plays a critical role in emphasizing the dynamism of the academic environment in Lebanon and enhancing its impact on Arab women. This will be made clear through different statements made by an elite group of Arab women who have excelled in many political, social, and business arenas.

Lebanon has established itself as a main center for education in general and higher education in particular. The multiplicity and diversity of universities has created a dynamism which has allowed equal educational opportunities for both men and women, spreading knowledge among people that has:

1. Reduced social discrimination;
2. Developed both private and public higher education, and opened local university branches; and
3. Promoted academic knowledge through scientific research, which is extremely important due to its vital role in enhancing the quality of education.

One of the key purposes of higher education is to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional, and national levels. While many institutions are national and international in their outlook, they have also developed an importance in the local and regional contexts. This importance is not only due to the centrality of higher education to the

future economic and social well being of the communities in which they are located, but also to the role that higher education plays in changing the very structure of the economy.

In recent years there has been a growing emphasis on the local and regional roles of higher education, to the extent that over three-quarters of such institutions now refer to local and/or regional objectives in their strategic plans. At the same time there have been a number of attempts to measure the impact of higher education at the local and regional levels. These studies have shown that, simply by their existence, higher education providers make a significant economic contribution in a locality — whether or not they adopt an explicit mission to generate local or regional economic activity or to play a part in the cultural life of their locality or region. The range of their role is in fact very wide, extending to support through research and consulting, attracting investment and providing new sources of employment, meeting labor market needs, supporting lifelong learning, and as centers of culture contributing to the quality of life in their localities.

Indeed, in spite of the often-inevitable difference in the purposes and timelines of research in higher education institutions and in the world of commerce, there has increasingly been a mutual recognition of the advantages of partnerships, and a will on the part of the higher education institution to seek them.

Because of established relationships between values, language, culture, economics, and education, there is a uniqueness of education in Lebanon and this I will now discuss.

The Components and Characteristics of Higher Education in Lebanon

Understanding the components requires defining the tasks or objectives:

The first objective is to provide vocational education through academic learning that is related to the needs of the society, and characterized by a certain margin of freedom and independence.

The second objective is to provide a civil and political education; in fact, universities develop the human resources of individuals who will later take on positions in the state, civil society and public sector, and this is achieved by the acquisition, through debate and discussion, of those principles guiding civil, cultural, and human identity.



Ms. Adalat Nakkash, Consul-General Donna Turk and Mr. Saad El Zein

These two objectives, though distinct, are yet complementary, and contribute to build an active citizenry — free, responsible, having enough insight and perception, and capable of formulating a judgment and opinion about themselves and their political society. Having said this, the question is why did we choose Lebanon? What are the characteristics of higher education in Lebanon?

At the beginning of history, Lebanon was one of the pioneers of the alphabet, and from its shores the alphabet

spread throughout the world. The first two ministries to be established were the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, and the Ministry of Vocational and Technical Training, to enrich the Lebanese educational system. In 1946, after independence, the Lebanese government replaced the old curricula, coming from the French Mandate, with new ones, and the Arabic language was imposed upon all schools as the primary language of instruction. The government also left students the freedom to choose a second language or more (French, English, etc...). Then the curricula were changed again. Each step of the educational process was specified with a defined goal.

In Lebanon, the educational levels after high school are university, college, professional institute, or high technical school. Lebanon has 23 universities, of which the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the Lebanese American University (LAU) are internationally known. AUB was the first English-language university to open in Lebanon, while the first university to open was the French-language Université Saint Joseph.

The Lebanese educational system has been a bilingual/trilingual system for a long time, teaching, besides Arabic, French and English as basic languages. A former minister once said that we make good use of this poly-lingual feature [of our society]: English is a practical language, French is a refined language, and Arabic is the mother language that molds the national cultural identity. In this context, the Lebanese American University stands out. LAU was the first women's college in Lebanon, which later transformed into a college that admitted both young men and women. It is also the seat for the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, which engages in academic research aimed at the study and support of women's issues and conditions in the

Arab world. LAU offers its students new perspectives and prepares them to be dynamic elements capable of introducing change into their society.

It is imperative that our young men and women continue to be anchored in the cultural values and religions that are only available in our part of the world. In short, if you want to attain the best progressive education within a mosaic of cultural celebrations and established history, while preserving our conservative religious and family values, your destination must be Lebanon.