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BAREND VLAARDINGERBROEK, ANIES AL-HROUB
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16. THE LEBANESE EDUCATION SYSTEM

*Heavy on Career Orientation, Light on Career Guidance*¹

ABSTRACT

The Lebanese education system is structured in such a way that potential career options for students are restricted by the tracks they are assigned to after the middle secondary level. A large number of students are diverted into vocational and technical education after Grade 9, while students who advance to upper secondary schooling are channelled into tracks that align with tertiary education and training pathways. Career *orientation* is thus built into the Lebanese education system. The history of career *guidance* in public sector education is a meagre one as there appears to be little political will to enact this aspect of education. What formal career guidance exists is largely located in the non-government sector. The chapter includes reference to career guidance services provided by UNRWA for Palestinian refugees residing in Lebanon.

THE LEBANESE ECONOMY AND LABOUR MARKET

The Lebanese economy is strongly service-driven with services and banking accounting for three quarters of Gross National Product (GNP). It is also somewhat stagnant with little growth and little job creation. With regard to employment, there is no established labour market information system and labour market data are “scant, incomplete, out-dated and in some cases contradictory” (European Training Foundation, 2015, p. 6). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is currently helping the National Employment Office set up such a system.

The informal employment sector remains an important one for many people. Unemployment estimates range from single digits to 25% depending on who is doing the measuring and what criteria are used. However, it is generally acknowledged that youth unemployment is very high, particularly for educated young people (Kawar & Tzannatos, 2013). The President of the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers in an interview with the Al-Safir news agency in 2014 stated that only one in every five young Lebanese graduates is able to find a job.

Sometimes referred to as ‘the classroom of the Middle East’, Lebanon has no shortage of educational institutions or opportunities, and produces high numbers

of well-qualified people. But there is a very poor match between graduate output and the needs of the economy, exacerbating educated unemployment and creating much underemployment. These factors, coupled with mediocre domestic salaries, contribute strongly to the on-going Lebanese diaspora that sees much high-level Lebanese human capital emigrating. At the same time, there is a shortage of medium-level technical expertise. This is unlikely to improve as technical education leading to such careers has a poor image in society at large. There is also a constant flow of unskilled labour into Lebanon to do the jobs that Lebanese generally do not want to do.

THE LEBANESE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Mainstream Government School System

The government education system is modelled on the French. The public sector school system exhibits strong central control by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education which is responsible for, amongst other things, teacher certification, curricula, textbooks and the official examinations. The school system is of the 6:3:3 type (6 years primary, 3 years lower secondary and 3 years upper secondary) with an examination filter at the end of the lower secondary part of the cycle (*i.e.* after Grade 9) and a terminating examination at the end of the upper secondary part of the cycle. These examinations commonly remain referred to as the *Brevet* and *Baccalauréat* (or *Terminale*) respectively although the names of the resultant certificates were Arabicised almost 20 years ago.

Grades 1–9 constitute the basic education cycle and involve a common standard curriculum. Candidates for the *Brevet* examination are examined in Arabic, mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, geography, history, civics and a second language (either English or French, this being mainly a matter of school policy). The three science subjects and mathematics are taught and examined in either English or French, while the remaining subjects are taught and examined in Arabic.

More than one quarter of students exit the school system after Grade 9, either voluntarily or because they failed the *Brevet*. At upper secondary level, Grade 10 has a common curriculum but Grade 11 students are streamed into science-intensive and non-science-intensive curricular pathways and Grade 12 features a typically Western European tracking system with four tracks: ‘general science’ (so called despite biology not being included), ‘life science’, ‘sociology and economics’, and ‘philosophy and literature’. There is a strong, indeed determinative, association between scholastic ability and the track undertaken, ‘GS’ students being the academically strongest, ‘LS’ students being the next ‘best’ students, and so on. The tracks are intended to align with tertiary education programmes (e.g. ‘GS’ with engineering and computer science). At upper secondary as at lower secondary level, the various subjects are taught and examined in either Arabic or one of the two European languages.

While both examinations may be considered to be of the ‘high stakes’ variety, the *Baccalauréat* is arguably less consequential than the *Brevet*. Owing to its timing – in the summer immediately preceding the commencement of the universities – ‘Bac’ results are generally not used in student selection and offers of a place at university are made conditional to applicants merely passing the examination (*i.e.*, gaining a cumulative 50% or better across all subjects). Both examinations are, moreover, plagued by widespread malpractice (Vlaardingerbroek, Shehab, & Alameh, 2011).

The Private School System

The private sector at both school and university level is a prominent feature of the Lebanese educational landscape. Government control over the private education industry is weak (Nahas, 2010), although there is some degree of control over private schooling through the requirement that Lebanese students take courses leading to the Lebanese official examinations unless exempted by virtue of having received prior schooling outside Lebanon.

There are both Francophone and Anglophone private schools, and some that deliver the curriculum to parallel French and English classes. The elite Francophone high schools offer both the French and Lebanese *Baccalauréat*, which are officially regarded as equivalent.

The private sector includes so-called ‘mid-private schools’ which offer subsidised fees to poorer clients. Some of the organisations that operate these schools also offer technical/vocational education.

The Technical and Vocational Education System below Tertiary Level

The technical/vocational education system below tertiary level is completely distinct from the mainstream school system and is fragmented, being situated in various public and private sector technical institutes, non-government organisations (NGOs) and commercial providers (Kawar & Tzannatos, 2013). It is administered by its own directorate which, akin to its mainstream counterpart, is responsible for curricula, textbooks and examinations. The official examinations result in the award of the *Brevet Professionnel* and the *Baccalauréat Technique*.

Technical/vocational students undertake an occupational major (*e.g.*, amongst others, pastry baking, motor mechanics, air-conditioning maintenance, bookkeeping, hotel management, interior design, nursing, avionics) together with a general education programme. Admission to some majors (*e.g.*, avionics) may be highly competitive.

The main transition point from mainstream schooling to technical/vocational education is after Grade 9. While there is a strong association between academic failure and technical/vocational education in the public psyche, Vlaardingerbroek and El-Masri (2008) found that most technical/vocational students enrolled for the

Baccalauréat Technique had in fact passed the *Brevet*, albeit mostly narrowly. Some students intending to enter vocational education do not bother to sit the *Brevet*, as the entry requirement at this level is merely completion of Grade 9. The attraction of technical/vocational education for many students in this sector appears to arise from its close association with the labour market. For a significant number, the need to earn money to help support their families is paramount. The same theme transpired in a study on the *Brevet Professionnel* (Vlaardingerbroek, Jaber, & El-Masri, 2008), particularly in the case of students who had ‘regressed’ to this level after having attended at least a part of upper secondary schooling. A powerful driver of career destination in Lebanon appears to be economic need, at least for the less affluent sections of society whose children populate the technical/vocational education institutions. Unlike ‘academic’ *Baccalauréat* graduates, *Baccalauréat Technique* and indeed *Brevet Professionnel* graduates are readily employable.

The Tertiary Education Sector

In Lebanon, the purpose of upper secondary schooling is to make the transition to tertiary education; the rate of transition from schooling to formal employment is extremely low (Vlaardingerbroek, Dallal, Rizkallah, & Rabah, 2007). There are more than 40 universities in Lebanon, although many of these would better be called colleges than universities. The largest, accounting for roughly half of all university admissions, is the national *Université Libanaise*; the remainder are private institutions. Among the elite private universities are the Francophone *Université St-Joseph* and the Anglophone American University of Beirut.

As noted earlier, admission to a university requires a pass in the Lebanese *Baccalauréat* or a recognised equivalent. However, some Anglophone universities modelled along American lines allow admission to a ‘freshman’ year without it. By law, *Baccalauréat Technique* graduates can enrol at a university, but only in their occupational major.

Universities make extensive use of selection mechanisms such as language proficiency testing, their own entrance examinations, and, for some Anglophone universities, the SAT. Many upper secondary students aiming for admission to prestigious private Anglophone universities spend considerable time preparing for the SAT rather than for the *Baccalauréat* examinations (Dabaja, 2010; Vlaardingerbroek & Shehab, 2011). As a general statement, students enter university majors for which they are qualified by virtue of their upper secondary track, although admission to a competitive-entry major may depend on their performance in tests such as the SAT.

In the technical/vocational education system, students can enrol in a *Diplôme de Technicien Supérieure* which is the highest qualification available for some occupational majors, while others can continue on to the *Licence Technique*. These are awarded by technical institutes. There is a flow of regular *Baccalauréat* graduates into the technical institutes after Grade 12.

CAREER GUIDANCE FOR STUDENTS IN LEBANON

A System with Built-in Career Orientation

With respect to the school education system, the obvious junctures at which career orientation is called for are Grade 9 (continuing with academic schooling or entering technical/vocational), and then for those remaining in the mainstream school system Grade 10 (orientation towards science-intensive or non-science-intensive track) and Grade 11 (which specific track to enter in Grade 12). In the technical/vocational education system, guidance is needed in the first year of the *Baccalauréat Technique* (occupational major); a significant proportion of students repeat the first year because they want to change their major.

To a large extent, the structure of the system and the way it operates acts as a proxy for career guidance. Students who fail the regular *Brevet* are unable to make the transition to upper secondary school and their career horizons are thereby limited to those that are attainable through technical/vocational education. Tertiary education and training options for students who complete upper secondary schooling are largely determined by the track they were in during Grade 12. For instance, a student who was in the ‘sociology and economics’ track will not be admitted into an engineering programme, at least not by a reputable university. Career orientation is largely built into the Lebanese education system through the way it filters and channels students. As one informant concurred, “Learners just go with the flow ... the Lebanese curriculum is structured in a way that filters the students and guides them indirectly.”

Career Guidance Services

Vlaardingerbroek and El-Masri (2008) reported that upper secondary students tended to present a narrow range of careers when asked about their prospects with ‘conventional’ occupations such as engineering, medical and teaching being the norm. The main source of careers information to emerge in this study was parents, with schools and teachers in second place; teachers in this context were acting mostly as individuals and not as members of any formal guidance network. Access to employment opportunities is also constrained by *wasta* – the Lebanese version of “It’s not *what* you know but *who* you know”. Mogharbel (2012) reported that social factors outweighed cognitive variables as contributors to high school student career indecision with the main ones being perceived social barriers and parental support (pp. 73–74).

A 1962 decree placed the onus for career guidance on the school inspectorate. This was followed by a 1972 decree which established a department for career guidance services within the Ministry of Education. A small number of teachers were trained as career guidance officers. A 1979 decree established a National Employment Office which was intended to provide a career guidance service, but

this endeavour never amounted to much in practice. Decrees in 1996 and 1997 laid the foundations for career guidance units in the technical/vocational directorate and the College of Education of the national university but the translation of these decrees into substantive services faltered. Career guidance came into the spotlight in the 2002 national education strategy but again came to little in practice; indeed a World Bank technical/vocational education project with an associated focus on career guidance was cancelled two years later.

There has generally been a lack of political will towards the implementation of career guidance services other than the annual publication of a handbook outlining university programmes; career guidance in so far as it exists in the Lebanese education system remains uninformed by the labour market (Sultana & Watts, 2007, 2008). Career guidance in the public schooling sector was described by Sultana and Watts (2007) as “informal at best” (p. 34). As one of our informants put it, “There is nothing called career guidance in Lebanon. No law, no decree, no department, no practice.... It is just a theory which has nothing to do in practice.”

In the private school sector, a small number of schools have well-established career guidance offices such as the elite International College (IC). IC provides senior secondary students with careers education by means of an annual careers fair, and advises them on programme options at Anglophone universities. The career guidance section there makes use of personality and interest inventories. It should be noted that IC provides students with the option of pursuing the International Baccalaureate, which is less restrictive than the Lebanese *Baccalauréat*. An interesting observation made by our IC informant was that parents of IC students tend to have had overseas life experience, often in Western countries, and tend to be less narrow-minded with regard to career options for their children than is typically the case for Lebanese parents. For these various reasons, however, the ‘IC model’ is not generalisable to Lebanon as a whole.

The Makassed Islamic Philanthropic Association is a leading ‘mid-private’ provider of education in Lebanon and operates both schools and vocational training institutions (the latter including a technical institute and a school of nursing). It has a policy on careers education at classroom level from pre-school level up. Formal career guidance begins in Grade 9 at which point some students may opt for the vocational track. Career guidance occurs in Grades 10–12 in the form of presentations by alumni and visits to universities or by university personnel.

There are also NGOs that provide career guidance services, although we were informed that a prominent NGO had recently abandoned its career guidance programme. The Waznat Group is a major actor in the private sector. It has connections with over 100 schools and trains careers counsellors who offer careers and higher education information and counselling to upper secondary students. Another private sector player is INJAZ, an affiliate of Junior Achievement Worldwide, which focuses mainly on the development of business-related and entrepreneurial skills among high school and university students.

On the whole, where career guidance occurs in Lebanon, it is provided by non-government agencies and focuses mainly on the transition to university study. The picture is, however, a very fragmented one. University teacher education departments do not appear to give a great deal of attention to career guidance in their programmes, although one university we came across offers a graduate course in it. Universities do operate guidance and placement services for their own students and graduates. This includes job fairs at which employers are invited to run stalls and send representatives to talk with potential recruits.

Exactly who should provide careers education/guidance is not a settled matter in Lebanon even where the issue is given some attention. Anglophone schools influenced by the American model tend to regard it as coming within the remit of school counsellors whereas Francophone schools take a more curriculum-based approach to the issue, reflective of the French model in which psychological counselling is provided by a counselling service operated by the Ministry which has little or no connection with careers counselling.

Career Guidance for Refugee Populations in Lebanon

Lebanon is home to a large Palestinian refugee community and is also hosting over a million Syrian refugees who have been displaced by the civil war there over the past 5 years. UNRWA manages school education and vocational education in the Palestinian camps. The Lebanese government has given Palestinian refugees the legal status of foreign residents since 1948. Therefore, UNRWA in Lebanon, in contrast to its other field offices, provides not only basic education (primary and lower secondary), but also upper secondary education. It also supports access to Lebanese and non-Lebanese university education through specific donor funding (Al-Hroub, 2014, 2015). Despite UNRWA's support, there are many challenges for Palestinian refugee students with regard to completing upper secondary education in Lebanon. For example, 10% of the population aged over 15 years have never attended school at all; only half of students of upper secondary school age (16–18 years) are enrolled in schools or vocational training centres; and two-thirds of Palestinians above the age of 15 did not attain the *Brevet* (UNRWA, 2011, p. 2).

Palestinians are limited in what occupations they can pursue in that they can only be employed in certain sections of the economy, mainly the 'traditional' ones such as construction and agriculture. They are also very active in the informal economy (ILO, 2012). With Palestinians barred from working in 36 occupations (mostly professions), however, the impact of career guidance during the education process with respect to employment outcomes is understandably a limited one. This has not hindered the development of a comprehensive career guidance system for Palestinian youths.

The Placement and Career Guidance Unit was founded in 1982. The target group is the Grade 9–12 student population (mainly Grades 9 and 12) and the unit caters

for both academic and vocational students. Career guidance activities include group orientation sessions, visits to academic fairs and UNRWA vocational/technical education institutions, and individual guidance. Trained career guidance counsellors were attached to UNRWA secondary schools in 2012 (UNRWA, 2015).

Grades 9 and 12 students are provided with group orientation sessions during the year. The main purpose of the first is to make students aware of the academic and vocational post-school pathways. Questionnaires aiming to identify students' interests and aptitudes are administered and the students are informed about the importance of individual careers counselling. The first session also provides students remaining in the academic track with information to help them decide between the science-intensive and non-science-intensive streams at upper secondary level. Grade 11 students are provided with information about the four Grade 12 specialised tracks. The second orientation session focuses on labour market indicators to be taken into account when choosing a university or vocational education institution and programme.

An annual event is a visit to Sibilin Vocational Training Centre for Grade 9 and 12 students. This is compulsory for all students even if they are intending to remain in academic education at the time. The students are given a comprehensive overview of all available courses at the Centre so that they are in a position to make well-informed choices about their post-school education and training. Another annual event is the UNRWA academic fair at which participating universities' representatives are introduced to Grade 11 and 12 students to their various academic programme offerings. An important aspect of this fair is to provide students with the information they require to make sound choices concerning their track in Grade 12 or their intended major at university (UNRWA, 2014, 2015).

The Unit launched a website in 2014 that gives users access to a wealth of information about the formal and informal labour markets, university and technical/vocational institutions and their programmes, and scholarships. Overall, Palestinian youths in Lebanon are very well catered for with respect to career guidance.

PROSPECTS

It is abundantly clear that there is little official appetite for career guidance in the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education. All indications are that the Ministry is happy to pay lip-service to the notion of career guidance but is not at all enthusiastic about implementing it. This suggests that government officials see little benefit in having a career guidance network. We have been informed that a careers counselling service will be initiated in late 2016 involving the training of a team of visiting careers counsellors; however, there appears to be no legislative background to this development, and we await the upshot with bated breath.

To play devil's advocate, the likely benefits of a career guidance system would be small. Career destinations in Lebanon are largely determined by social class (the poor attend public sector institutions and populate the technical-vocational education

system, while the affluent attend private sector institutions and patronise the elite universities) and the tracks students are channelled into by the highly structured education system. Against such a backdrop, it could be argued that career guidance is realistically limited to advising students about clusters of careers with similar entry requirements, such as plumbing/motor mechanics or teaching/nursing.

Career destinations being determined to a very large extent by programmes of study that are followed after Grade 9, *career guidance* for students mostly comes down to *academic* guidance with respect to tracks to pursue. But this too is largely illusory in the Lebanese context owing to the manner in which academic orientation is imposed by scholastic achievement rather than being chosen. The ‘brick wall’ mentality that separates mainstream schooling from technical-vocational education (Vlaardingerbroek, 2016) moreover militates against a departure from traditional, strictly segregated career destinations in favour of a more flexible approach especially to middle-level occupations.

The Lebanese education system is nominally of the same type as those of various Western European systems such as the French and German. However, while tracking is as much a feature of those European systems as it is of the Lebanese, there is far greater student choice now built into those other systems than remains the situation in Lebanon. One reason for this is the weakening of the determinative role of mid-secondary examinations and the concomitant right (indeed, duty) of students to continue their education into the upper secondary stage. Options are examined and discussed between students, parents and careers counsellors. Another very important consideration is the comparatively high image that technical education enjoys in the Western European countries.

A proposal presented by Vlaardingerbroek (2016) is to create a ‘technological’ track at upper secondary level which involves students being dually enrolled in mainstream secondary schools for academic subjects and attending technical institutes for occupationally-specific education and training, a model to be found in the US and Australia, for instance. This would go a long way towards opening up new career-oriented fields for many Lebanese students. Unfortunately, this suggestion is unlikely to materialise.

At the time of writing, Lebanese MPs have floated the idea of abandoning the *Brevet* examinations. Rather than breaking down barriers, all this would be likely to result in would be a massive increase of student flows into upper secondary schooling (academically weak students at that), many of whom would transfer to the technical-vocational education sector at a later date, as is already the case for some (Vlaardingerbroek, Jaber, & El-Masri, 2008). It would probably see greater numbers of students entering ‘universities’ (mostly not very good ones) and graduating with second-rate qualifications mostly in low-prestige fields for which there are few openings in the labour market.

Until there are some profound changes in the Lebanese mindset towards the nature and functions of education and its association with social class and career destinations, the *status quo* is likely to continue into the foreseeable future.

While there is certainly a positive role for career guidance to play at discrete junctures at which vital programme choices need to be made – Grade 9, Grade 11 and the first year of technical/vocational education – it seems that career guidance in the Lebanese education system will at best be confined to tinkering at the edges. We shall end with a quote from a key informant that summarises the broad issue of the education/career nexus in Lebanon rather well (quoted *verbatim*):

As for the *orientation professionnelle* [career guidance – Ed.], as believed by many, it is for the academically below average scoring students. Although this mentality is falling back, however we still see an inflation in the academic sector as compared to the vocational one. Therefore, by just giving speeches to learners about their future, we are not helping them. For instance instead of saying “we have many engineers” we [should] say “we have x engineers in Lebanon, y of them are unemployed and z of them left the country while n of them are employed in a domain which is different from theirs.”

NOTE

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