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The need for civic engagement and competency in higher education in Lebanon

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Abstract

Lebanon has always been unstable on the political and the national security levels. The youth in Lebanon did not have the privilege of stability to engage in civic activities and become active citizens. The youth need to collaborate with adults to explore different issues and opportunities to develop civic engagement in their own society. This study is an exploratory research which reveals the need for constructive plans in higher education in Lebanon that will lead youth to civic engagement and competence. It also focuses on exploring the existence of university curriculum that fosters the actual implementation of civic engagement and civic competency programmes. Data were collected using a qualitative framework. University students' civic competency, knowledge, skills, participation in civic engagement, attitudes and efficacy are assessed by using focus group discussions with students and instructors. The research outcomes provide a foundation for the sustainable interventions through the development of a university curriculum.

Keywords: Civic engagement, civic competency, Lebanon.

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1. Significance of the study

In Weber's sociology, the individual human being is thrown back upon itself by a disenchanted society. Weber's desire was to transform the individual into a genuine human being who has self-esteem and values freedom. He claimed that the more free the action of the individual, the better personality comes into play. Personality is not unpredictable and irrational, but instead something that is expressed with means-ends, decision-making and the rational accomplishment of goals (Weber, 1978). As Lowith (1982, p. 38) interprets it, the human being is thus forced to attempt their own construction and create meaning in both theoretical and practical terms. Moreover, Durkheim states that personal autonomy and self-responsibility is a human being's rational awareness of reasons for what they do. Under the impulsions of self-discipline and through the attachment to the group, human beings have to develop a rational awareness of the reasons for their conduct (Durkheim & Giddens, 1972, p. 102). With an opportunity to track knowledge, comes the civic learning. It will help learners take a part and put that knowledge to work in the service of humankind (McIlrath, Lyons, & Munck, 2012). The current environment for higher education requires that universities become more engaged and involved in their operation, so that the graduates succeed in a highly fluid, rapidly changing and hyper-competitive environment in which conditions of uncertainty prevail (Hines, 2005; Hitt, Ireland, Camp, & Sexton, 2002).

2. Introduction

2.1. Civic learning

The lexis civic learning is at times used as a higher-level descriptor to involve knowledge, intellectual and participatory skills, values and attitudes or dispositions (Gould, 2011; Hurtado, Ruiz & Whang, 2012a, 2012b; Musil, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). This term involves one or many of the following: engaging actively in public land community service, accepting and valuing diversity, building cultural bridges, developing empathy, social responsibility and philanthropy and upholding social justice. Due to its importance, educational leaders such as (Conant, 1945; Dewey, 1916; Pollack, 2013) stress to include civic learning that is related to the development of individuals' civic competencies throughout the years of instruction.

2.2. Civic competency

Civic competency consists of three pillars: civic knowledge (conceptual as well as factual knowledge), analytic skills and involvement skills. Each domain has several components. Branson (1998) and Torney-Purta, Cabrera, Roohr, Liu, and Rios (2015) depicted civic knowledge, the content or what citizens ought to know, as a basic pillar that lets individuals understand existing events and make rational judgments about their own participation in actions or discussions on the campus and in public. They also added that the analytical skills are of vast importance. People need to be able to analyse the constituents and consequences of ideas, social, political or economic processes, and institutions to differentiate between means and ends and between fact and opinion or to clarify responsibilities such as those between personal and public responsibilities. They also need instructions and learning to see social and political problems with a realistic sense to track, evaluate and compose arguments for and against a position. In addition to the acquisition of knowledge and analytical skills, they emphasised that participatory and involvement skills are other pillars that contribute to civic competency.

2.3. Civic engagement

According to Branson (1998) and Torney-Purta et al. (2015), civic competency with its three props should be accompanied by another domain of civic learning, which is civic engagement that is the active practice or participation in autonomous life.

Civic engagement also has three pillars: motivations and efficacy, values and democratic norms, participation and activities. They refer to interest, involvement or engagement in attending to civic information along with the sense that one has the capacity to understand a situation or undertake a successful civic or political action and to the belief in basic principles of democracy and to actions in order to nurture a sense of respect in a diverse society.

2.4. Civic education in Lebanon

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) called for experts and activists to engage in a vital discussion about the needs, skills and competencies that enable active youth civic engagement. They also stressed the means that can serve Arab youth gain civic competencies. They also called to explore the outcomes for civic learning and engagement about the self, communities, knowledge, skills, values and public action (UNESCO, 2015). In this regard, the Lebanese Association for Educational Studies has been undergoing a remarkable revolution and claimed that Arab countries are in urgent need for universities to add the civic role as a third mission, side by side with research and teaching. They also confirmed that the higher education sector is the best sector in the society to play the role of the incubator of values and practices, and to promote them in the society directly or through its graduates (Lebanese Association for Educational Studies, 2015). In April 2015, they held a conference which was supervised by a committee of academics. The conference aimed at thinking about and deliberating the civic role that is, or could be, undertaken by Arab universities (2016). In Beirut, in May 2015, a group of 25 regional experts from the Ministry of Youth and Social Affairs, civil society organisations and media institutions from seven Arab countries (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Morocco, Bahrain and Sudan) shared good practices and lessons learnt in monitoring policies and programmes with youth participation and youth targeting. To support youth policy process, they trained the participants on making a monitoring plan (UNESCO, 2015).

The Lebanese universities are of no exception in this regard. In a study conducted in Lebanon entitled 'Education and Citizenship: Educational Approaches and Curriculum in Faculties of Education in Lebanon', Khaliefe (2014) found that 2 out of 12 universities in Lebanon formally offer majors in civic education. The Lebanese University (LU) and Saint Joseph University designed programmes to teach civic education which encompasses programmes and courses on citizenship. It is noteworthy to mention that in 2008, the American University of Beirut (AUB) founded a Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service in collaboration with numerous international and local agencies committed to supporting community service and civic engagement. They aimed to develop a culture of service and civic leadership within the AUB community and provide opportunities for university students, faculty and staff from all backgrounds to study and respond to social and civic needs and to engage in activities that enhance academic learning, civic responsibility and the skills of citizenship (AUB, 2017). Lebanese American University (LAU) also focuses on civic engagement as a central part of the university culture. Elie Samia, the assistant vice president of Outreach and Civic Engagement (OCE), talked about OCE's role in promoting engagement with the community and the ways in which the activities could support LAU's mission to serve the broader society. LAU runs major programmes, starting with the Global Classroom LAU Model United Nations, the Model Arab League, the Moderation and Justice Academy for Leaders and the Leadership and Constitutional Education Academy. The Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (2016) in collaboration with the British Council, the Directorate—General of the LMO Schools and the Youth for Peace NGO, organised a Civic Engagement Day entitled: 'Locally Engaged, Globally Connected'.

The Erasmus Higher Education Reform Experts in Lebanon organised a 1 day seminar to offer the occasion to review some good practices and successful approaches adopted in the European Higher Education Area. Several Lebanese experiences in the domain of civic engagement were presented together with the outcomes of several European Tempus and Erasmus plus projects. The presentations and discussions were organised based on three major axes: The civic engagement components in the academic programmes, curricula and courses, the internal colleges' activities related to civic engagement and the national community service projects that foster civic engagement (Erasmus, 2016). A year after, on February 16, 2017, they organised another seminar at Rafik Hariri University in Mechref in collaboration with the Directorate General of Higher Education. They focused on some practices and approaches adopted by several Lebanese higher education institutions: The Universite Antonine, LAU, Lebanese International University (LIU), Beirut Arab University (BAU), University of Balmand (UOB) and AUB.

3. Purpose of the Study

This study uses data collected from various Lebanese universities to build an awareness programme in the field of civic education drawing on curriculum guidelines for civic engagement and civic competency in higher education in LU contexts. In this paper, the researchers show to what extent the universities in Lebanon are exercising their civic responsibility by examining civic competency, which is civic knowledge and skills; and civic engagement that is motivation, values and participation. The researchers also aim to propose a comprehensive approach with sustainable interventions for fostering youths' civic engagement and competency in Higher Education in Lebanon.

4. Research Questions

Based on the literature review, this paper is directed towards the following questions:

- How do universities in Lebanon integrate knowledge, intellectual and participatory skills, values and dispositions or attitudes to foster civic engagement and civic competency?
- To what extent are the universities in Lebanon exercising their civic responsibility?

5. Research Hypotheses

- Considering the current higher education curriculum in Lebanon, civic engagement and civic competency features are not prominent priority areas.
- Teaching about civic engagement and civic competency in higher education is embedded in hidden curricula.

6. Methodology

6.1. Design of the study

This study employs the qualitative research method which is primarily exploratory. Focus group discussions are used as a qualitative framework to help the researchers explore the field and obtain more in-depth information about the need for civic education awareness; and the effectiveness of civic competencies and engagement by using and following a formal education programme in Lebanon. The collected data is used to highlight the existing status of the academic university curriculum that deals with civic engagement which will eventually be proposed as a basis to lead these universities into building their civic capacities.

6.2. Data sources and collection

This research study depended on two sources of data:

- a. Documented data, using secondary information sources including books, journals, reviews and reports. The purpose of the collected data is to generate the literature review of the thesis as well as the content of the intended civic education programme.
- b. Focus groups’ data, generated directly from selected universities in Lebanon both private and public: LIU, LU, Islamic University of Lebanon and Jinan University. The focus groups’ data is necessary to present primary information to augment the validity of the literature review.

6.3. Instruments

To examine the universities’ civic mission, curriculum and courses, and the approach of exercising their civic responsibilities, the researchers conducted focus group discussions, which are qualitative in nature. Two sets of discussions were designed; one with instructors and the other with students. Four focus groups of instructors, consisting of six each, have participated in addition to two groups of students also consisting of six each. Participants have been selected from a conveniently identified pool of instructors and students from different faculties and departments in the aforementioned universities. All participants have been invited, within the ethical context of the exercise, to participate. The group facilitator is one of the researchers, who herself is a university instructor.

7. Results

For the qualitative data collection, six focus group discussions were conducted: 24 professors and 12 students from the selected universities. They were held in April 2017. The participants were both males and females in both groups, but with the majority of females. Through these focus groups, the researchers wanted to collect information about the professors’ and the students’ knowledge, skills, attitudes and motivation regarding the need for civic engagement and civic competency education for university students in Lebanon. Professors’ and students’ roles in this study were essential because they are at the core of this issue and they are supposed to be the most cognisant of the universities’ civic responsibility. In this study, focus groups discussions are used to create a complete picture of how this issue affects academics and students. According to Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest, and Namey (2005), ‘focus groups contribute to this broad understanding by providing well-grounded data on social and cultural norms, the pervasiveness of these norms within the community and people’s opinions about their own values’ (p. 52). The researchers concur with such argument, because such findings can provide a unique insight into existing knowledge, skills, attitudes and motivation toward civic learning in higher education. According to Krueger (1988), data can be examined and reported at three levels, including 1) the raw data, 2) descriptive statements and 3) interpretation.

The first set of focus groups’ discussions was conducted with university professors. The following are the outcomes of the discussions, the questions and a sample of what was stated.

Outcomes	Questions	Samples of responses
To understand instructors’ knowledge of ‘Civic Learning’.	What is civic learning?	-Learning how to be a good citizen. -Promoting the education of students for engaged citizenship through democratic participation in their communities, respect and appreciation of diversity, applied learning and social responsibility. -Knowing about society, laws, rules and rights. -Knowing about citizenship and democracy.
To check if instructors knew what civic engagement is.	What is civic engagement?	-Participating in activities and projects for a better community -Being involved in society (vote, elect) -Working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities -Developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values

1. To find out whether university students need such education and the purpose of it	Is there a need to teach civic engagement and civic competency for university students? Why?	and motivation to make a difference -Yes, there is, because young people in our society, in their majority, act as individuals with little regard to the group they belong to. I believe the school system failed them in this regard and we need to make up for this at university. -Yes, to develop their interpersonal and analytical skills.
2. To find out if civic engagement and civic competency are taught at Lebanese universities	Do Lebanese universities teach civic engagement and civic competency? How?	-They are only taught if they fall under certain courses for humanity majors. -They are taught only through service extra-curricular activities. -Social service is not linked to classroom learning. -We teach about engagement through models and simulations in classrooms not through participation.
3. To explore the readiness of universities to take on civic education.	Are there governmental curriculum guidelines for civic engagement and civic competency to be taken on by universities to teach civic education?	-I don't have enough information to answer this question. -We are not aware of it. -There is a calendar for events; we are not provided with curriculum guidelines. -The learning outcomes that I have access to don't serve directly the civic engagement skills.
4. To find out if instructors expect good results after administering civic engagement and civic competency in the curriculum	As university instructors, do you expect any kind of change in students' motivation, skills, values and attitudes after teaching about civic education?	-I believe if this instruction is delivered properly, change will occur but it will take wise choices of materials and teaching strategies, because university students have already acquired concepts and social behaviour norms that might translate into resistance at first. This means instructors will have to be trained by professionals. -If we encourage debates in the classrooms, if we teach about values and assign tasks and activities that tackle one per semester, a change may take place.
5. To check if and how civic education courses can be integrated in the curriculum	Can the university curriculum include or integrate civic competency and civic engagement education as a major or elective course and in which fields of study?	-Language, arts, social studies and any course that teaches communication such as marketing, public relations, human resources and the like. -All departments can include civic education -Interpersonal skills and values should be practiced in all departments. -Yes, in a wide range of courses.

The participants' understanding of 'civic learning' is derived from their individual experiences and convictions. Participants displayed a good knowledge of civic engagement after a short explanation of the concept by the researcher. All participants agreed that there is a need to teach civic engagement and civic competency for university students. They also gave recommendations for starting civic education at an earlier stage to have better results. The instructors stated that universities do not have formal instructions in civic competency and civic engagement. However, they mentioned informal instructions carried out through discussions in some humanity courses. Some stated that university administrations should be responsible for this civic education and its implementation. This shows that instructors believe that change can happen because students are ready and have the

potential to learn and change their behaviours and attitudes provided that the programme is handled well and teachers are well trained. The results also show that instructors find it very feasible to integrate civic education in the university curriculum and they suggested that all departments can adopt such courses.

To further explore this issue, university students were asked to participate in the focus groups discussions to highlight their knowledge, exposure and skills regarding civic education and civic engagement. A sample of what they stated is combined in the following outcomes:

Outcomes	Questions	Samples of responses
To understand students' knowledge of 'Civic Learning'	What is civic learning?	-Learning about our society -Knowing about human rights -Studying about citizenship -Learning about democracy
To check if students knew what civic engagement is	What is civic engagement?	-Volunteering in social service -Working in groups -Participating in social work and campaigns
To find out whether their universities offer civic education	Which courses have you taken that had equipped you with civic knowledge?	-Media Laws in Ethics; we exchanged information, mainly about corruption in media. -None; such courses don't exist. -The focus is to improve our language and the skills in the major. -Human Rights -Public Relations
To find out if civic engagement skills are fostered at Lebanese universities	Are there courses that helped you develop your social participation and your interpersonal skills?	-Yes. Public Relations; we had to participate in events, mainly for charity. -Sure. Special Education; we had to visit schools and conduct activities with special learners -Yes. Sociology course; we went and visited a medical centre for children with cancer and we did some fun activities for them.
To explore the readiness of students to take on civic education	Are you interested in community service? If you had the chance to participate, what would you do?	-Charity events -As Palestinian in Lebanon, no. I experienced discrimination from some students because of my accent. Some didn't feel comfortable around me. -I don't do things for free. -Not interested in public issues unless the issue affects me positively or negatively. -I am interested in something new, new insight. Most of the activities and the events that take place at university are cliché; they call for women's rights and democracy, but they don't apply, so why participate? -Sick hearing about such clichés
To find out if students had any role in participating in social or political issues	Have you ever participated or had a role in local issues?	-For 1 day, I participated in an activity for 'Mentally challenged Kids' to help special learners. -Since I get nothing in return, I won't participate. -I participated in fund raising activities to help needy people; I felt good about myself.

The results show that students understood the concept of 'civic learning' in different ways, but they all revolved in the same sphere. Students showed a good knowledge and understanding of civic engagement and it was salient in the variety of answers and examples they gave.

Although the students understood civic engagement and civic education, they were not formally exposed to them in classes. However, they stated that they encounter some civic engagement issues in certain major courses such as public relations, media and human rights. These responses showed that students are not formally taught about civic engagement, but they are participating socially and developing their interpersonal skills via the activities they do as outcomes of their classes. Some responses show that students are not very interested in community services and they need new approaches to such actions because they believe that whatever efforts they have exerted, the turning results are unsatisfactory. Other responses show that they have tried to participate but as they stated earlier, they are not getting anything in return, and they found whatever they have done were unsatisfactory on many levels. The outcome of some students' social engagement is satisfactory only on the personal level but no lessons learned.

8. Conclusion and Limitations

This research paper intended to highlight the urgent need for civic engagement and civic competency in the Lebanese universities. The Lebanese society is a society which is still recovering from the aftermath of wars and conflicts, and it is in great need for social reconstruction and to achieve this, civic education, civic engagement and competency must be implemented. This study used focus groups discussions with the most important pillars of education, the instructors and the students. The participants' knowledge, exposure, opinions, experiences and attitudes were addressed and used as a feedback to highlight the issue of this major need in education.

The instructors were well aware of this need and they recommended that universities should include and integrate civic engagement and civic competency in their curriculum. Although none of the universities in this research has a formal curriculum that fosters civic education, but many of them undertake social issues and social activities as informal curriculum. To foster civic engagement and civic competency, a formal curriculum is required with formal objectives that deal with the social issues. This research found that the majority of students lack the enthusiasm and the interest when it came to their local communities. However, when the social activities sprung out of certain university courses, they were more than being willing and happy to do them. This shows that a structured civic engagement programme can lead to positive results for the students and the instructors which will affect the Lebanese society as a whole.

There were few limitations for this research study. First, the number of the universities under study was small, a bigger number could have provided a better representation of the Lebanese universities' positions regarding civic engagement. Second, a quantitative method of collecting data could have added more value by providing facts and figures to support the daim of the study, which is the urgent need for civic engagement and civic competency in higher education in Lebanon.

Although there were few limitations, the claim of the study was supported by the feedback from the focus groups discussions with the instructors and the students. This research study must be further explored on a wider scale to provide ample data to support a proposal for the Ministry of Education in Lebanon to include and integrate civic engagement and civic competency in the Lebanese national curriculum for higher education.

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