The need for an online higher education law

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Online university degrees are now available all around the world and this is disrupting local universities in small countries as they struggle to remain competitive and retain their tuition pipeline.

The current legislation in Lebanon does not allow for online education, even though the government issued a temporary authorization to cope with the COVID crisis.

The Lebanese top five universities are fighting the current draft law presented by MP Edgard Traboulsi as they fear the legalization will open the country's borders and thus allow a student's flight to international or low-end local online degrees.

This fear seams unreasonable as top tier Lebanese universities will not lose more students than they currently have because of the economic meltdown. On the contrary, it could be viewed as a necessary transformation process that would direct them toward export services. One could argue that the fastest way for those universities to receive fresh dollars is to attract online foreign students or Lebanese expats online students.

Lebanese top tier universities can also offer blended learning to the Lebanese students giving a feel, touch and flavor that would be difficult to beat by their competition abroad. This is especially true for specialization that would require the students to attend a few sessions. The cost of travel and the current Lebanese to dollar exchange rate allow local universities to regain some level of competitiveness. One competitive advantage they have is the Arabic language.

For local universities the barrier to entry to their market was dramatically lowered when online degrees flourished and international supply was made available. The pound devaluation has rebalanced this barrier in the Lebanese universities' favor by making the fees of the foreign universities higher.

Another factor could diminish local universities' fear of borders opening legalization. One of their biggest competitive edge was that without an equivalency one could not work in the public sector unless he or she had a local diploma. Now the attraction of the public sector employment has dramatically decreased and this barrier is now meaningless.

MARKET SELF-REGULATION OR GOVERNMENT CONTROL

Searching for relevant country practices one can find two school of thoughts.

1. Legalizing open borders, free issuing of local and international online degrees and relying on the market to regulate itself. Students' final distribution will depend on the quality/price of the universities they are buying their degrees from.

2. Submitting online degrees to a licensing process that passes through a quality control check by public or private sector institutions. Very few countries forbid local citizens from purchasing international online degrees, but some only give equivalency to those locally accredited by relevant authorities.

One solution to this conundrum could be a multiple steps approach that would go as follow:

1. Legalize higher education online learning

2. Adopt a university equivalency criterion, meaning once a university is vetted by the equivalency board, its degrees are given equivalency whether online or offline

3. Same goes for local universities. Once they have the proper licenses, their degrees are deemed accepted whether online or offline.

4. An additional quality control procedure or layer can be added by the executive branch later on by contracting with internationally recognized private bodies.

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