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Changing Curriculum Changing Times

Abstract

This research work was based on a case study of the Lebanese American University (LAU), which was not only able to survive during the civil war and the post war period, i.e., from the year 1975-76 to the year 2002-03, but also to grow into multi-campus university. LAU changed from a Christian college for women to a secular university open to male and female students. Although there are more than 45 registered universities in Lebanon offering various academic programs and meeting the various demands for university education, the number of students enrolled at LAU increased from around 500 students in 1975, developing into a medium size university with around 4,500 students in 2002.

The curriculum for an educational institution represents the means for attracting students. The programs offered show the key values of the university, and how it positions itself in the higher education market. In this paper, the researcher studies the changes in the curriculum and the educational programs offered, affecting the survival and growth of the university in an increasingly competitive market.

The researcher used semi-structured interviews and refers to bulletins issued by LAU, newspapers, and other published material, in order to enhance the validity and reliability of the data collected. The people selected participated in the operations of the university or studied at LAU during the period under study. The sample included eight people from the management group, eighteen faculty members and twelve alumni. The faculty members and alumni are divided into old-timers and new-timers, and the entire sample is divided into females and males. The researcher used stratified proportion sampling-different age groups, different religious affiliations.

The systematic analysis of the data collected led to an understanding of the relation among the different variables, such as economic and political conditions in the country, gender differences, age group or years of services of the faculty affecting the curriculum or academic programs offered. In addition, the data describes the continual adaptation of the university to changing environmental conditions and circumstances. The conclusion was reached after a deep analysis of the data collected, theorizing about changing curriculum during changing times.

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Changing Curriculum Changing Times

Introduction

Educational institutions are engaged in continual adaptation to changing environmental conditions and circumstances. In general, all major internal and external resources, such as faculty characteristics, facilities, market demands and organizational structure affect the curriculum choice.

Lebanon is waking up from a major crisis, the civil war, which started in 1975 and lasted a devastating sixteen years. During that period, The Lebanese American University (LAU) was able to find the proper ground for growing and developing, whereas, others were not so fortunate. It changed from a small college and one campus to a medium size university with three campuses in different areas of Lebanon. In this study, the researcher examines the changes in the curriculum; i.e., the process of change in the educational programs offered, the product LAU made available to its community. She considers the changes in the academic program and the development in the curriculum, as the consolidation of the efforts of the college in becoming a university and lead to the significant growth of the university (i.e., the growth in enrolment) (Appendix, Figure-1).

Literature Review

Curriculum

Curriculum is a set of intentions regarding what experiences are to be offered through organized education (Miel, 1996). It involves all the activities leading to learning in a program, normally resulting in a qualification such as a certificate, a diploma or a degree. It refers not only to the official lists of courses offered by the school (the official curriculum), but also to the purpose, content, activities, and organization of the educational program actually created in a university by the faculty members, students, and administrators (Walker and Soltis, 1997). In general, the curriculum is taken to be all those activities designed or encouraged within the school's organizational framework to promote the intellectual, personal, social, and physical development of students. The

curriculum and the pedagogy used to deliver or create it are the outcomes of political processes that have been negotiated between a variety of social groups inside and outside the university (Busher, 2001)

Profession Driven Subjects

Although there is a continuing market demand for an undergraduate education that de-emphasizes functional employment during the undergraduate years, more weight is given nowadays to profession-driven subject matter in the overall university curricula as a reaction to the changing population (Kushner, 1999). Breneman (1994, p. 139) refers to it as a “dominant strategy needed for survival”. Mintzberg (1988) argues that curriculum choice is part of the university strategy, which includes the institution’s position in its competitive environment and its outlook or perspective on the environment (cited in Kushner, 1999). The academic program or curriculum is one way where universities differentiate their offerings to prospective students, who select among institutions of higher learning the one offering programs agreeing with their choice. Szekeres (2004) refers to it as “Marketisation” which is based on the idea that universities are now operating in a marketplace where they compete with each other for students, government funding and corporate dollar. In general, program modification is one element of response to product-market environment in higher education. In general, program modification is one element of response to product/market environment in higher education as Dill (1999) notes

Oblinger and Verville (1998) believe that because a majority of college graduates are employed in the business sector, regardless of a student’s academic major, higher education must be concerned with the educational needs of business. The reason is that the business community nowadays is faced with an unprecedented rate of change that creates a need not only for the traditional cognitive and affective development of students, but also for some very specific intellectual and social skills (Fife, 2000). The business community needs graduates who have been trained to think analytically, creatively, and practically.

The Process of Change

According to Johnson, (1998, p. 45): “Things change and they are never the same again... If an institution does not change, it becomes extinct”. Institutions that want not only to survive in the future but stay competitive are constantly changing. Similarly, Covey (1999) and Anderson (1998) stressed the importance of change for the development of an organization. According to them, innovative companies are continually responding to change in their environment. When the environment changes, these companies change too.

Not all change is improvement, but all improvement leads to change (Fullan, 1999). A diversity of forces influence change and innovation in organizations (Bartol and Martin, 1998). Some of these forces stem from external factors while others arise from factors that are basically internal to the institution. According to Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow and Easton (1998) people who are better prepared for the inevitable confusion and conflict associated with organizational change fare better.

The two main imperatives for change are competitiveness and survival. Competitiveness represents effectiveness in the intermediate time period and has to do with an institution’s responsiveness to environmental change (Gibson, Ivancevich and Donnelly, 1994). It refers to an institution’s (a university’s in this case) ability to remain a viable player in the higher education market and requires flexibility in decision-making because it allows change and welcomes it as part of the productive process.

Resistance is itself a normal part of the political process (Busher, 2001). In general, “people want things to stay the same and they think change will be bad for them” (Johnson, 1998, p. 93). One reason for resisting change is self-interest. If a person perceives change to be unfavorable for him or her, he/she will exert effort to resist it.

Methodology

In order to gather the research data, the researcher used semi-structured and sometimes unstructured interviews (open-ended questions), and documentary analysis from newspapers, magazines and LAU internal reports. The sample included eight members from the management group, eighteen faculty members, and twelve alumni. The faculty members and alumni were divided into old-timers and new timers, and the entire sample was divided into males and females. The sample consisted of diversified populations in terms of respondent background, age, gender and status at LAU. This heterogeneous

group of people was selected on purpose in order to get diversified views and in order to test for differences in opinions and behaviour.

The main research question addressed in this paper focused on the changes in the curriculum in response to the changing environmental conditions and in response to the market demand for higher education.

Educational Programs and Curriculum Choice Offered

The Process of Change

Members of the Managing Team

Changing from a small college to a university is a challenging issue. Five members of the managing team believed that the institution was able to survive because it was a small college at the time. They stressed that the growth of LAU was the outcome of a normal phenomenon in nature. According to them, it was easy to add new programs. As some of them put it,

LAU was starting from scratch. There was nothing to change but just to move ahead.

When you build a new house you can design anything you want. But if you are renovating an old building you are constrained in your design by the old architectural form i.e., the old academic programs. Because we started small, it was relatively easy for the institution to start new programs and appoint new faculty.

The remaining three members of the managing team mentioned the difficulties encountered:

At the beginning, the faculty could not cope with such a pace of change. They were questioning every single step we were doing . . . Later things improved. They got used.

When the war ended, it was time for change, i.e., adding new programs, recruiting new faculty members.... Now it is time to put our house in order.

Old-Time Faculty Members

Similarly, all the old-time faculty members talked about the change. When the war ended the focus was on improving the academic standards. The faculty member, who was strict in grading and tough with the students when it came to academic affairs, was considered

successful. In order to deal with reality, the management group required the faculty members to change their standards of performance. A female old-time faculty member said:

When the civil war ended around 1992, the vice president of academic affairs declared that the improvement of our academic programs so as to insure accreditation, was our target.

However, one old-time faculty member added:

With the addition of three professional schools and the increase in faculty members with professional training, i.e., in business, pharmacy and engineering, old time faculty members teaching social science courses thought they were losing their former role as main contributors and educators at LAU. They felt that teachers with professional training were becoming more in demand and were enjoying a higher salary.

Newly Recruited Faculty Members

The new faculty members agreed with the old-timers that:

Change is a normal process. Nothing remains the same. When an organization does not change it will collapse. LAU had to meet the need of the local and international higher education market.

Other authors such as Covey (1994), Johnson (1998), and Anderson (1998), wrote about the importance of change as a prerequisite for improvement.

Meeting Market Demand for Higher Education:

Competitive Educational Market

As mentioned before, the interviewees referred to the educational programs and the curriculum choice offered reporting the need to meet the requirements of a competitive educational market for higher education. Most of the interviewees stressed that the curriculum offered at LAU represented the product or the service the university was providing, or 'selling', to its stakeholders.

Members of the Management Team

Four male members of the managing team considered the university as a business organization, needing to provide quality education in order to meet the competitive market demand for higher education. They referred to the educational programs offered as a prosperous business. They stressed the financial aspect of the problem of survival especially since there are more than 44 universities in Lebanon and LAU's tuition fees are relatively high. Some of them reported:

Like in every business endeavor, the university should offer a product meeting the market demand. The purpose is to offer the Lebanese and foreign markets professionals tailored to the specific needs of the business world.

University education is a prosperous business in Lebanon. We have more than forty-four universities. Many of them provide programs similar to ours. Our tuition fees are high; that is why we have to provide an academic program meeting the expectations of the students and the community.

Because the students and their employers are becoming more demanding, and in order to meet the demand for university education, we became very conscious in adjusting our areas of emphasis, adding new programs when we see the need. In Lebanon people want their children to be either engineers or a pharmacists or a medical doctors or a businessmen. The university has started an engineering school, a School of Pharmacy and has launched an MBA executive program.... The university will open the School of Medicine soon.

However, two female members from the management team were concerned with serving the students and the community. They said:

Historically Lebanese people have been emigrating to the United States of America, to Brazil, to Canada and even to Africa, looking for new opportunities in life. This trend was exaggerated because of the civil war in Lebanon and because of the deteriorating economic condition in the country. LAU tries to offer an educational program meeting the demand of the local and international market as well. Our aim was to achieve brain-drain reversal by creating opportunities for studying in Lebanon and thus decreasing the chances for our young men and women to go abroad and stay there... Similarly families who left the country during the civil war are given a reason to return offering to their children the opportunity to acquire good education. .

We were aware that good education was the only thing we could give to our children. We want to graduate entrepreneurs, the impresarios of the future ... Because of the deteriorating economic conditions in the country, the

majority of our students wanted to major in professional fields of specialization such as business, engineering and pharmacy.

When talking about the growth of the university, five members of the managing team, regardless of gender differences, referred to change, flexibility and quality as a tool for providing an educational program meeting the need of the students and the community.

Quoted below are some reflections made by members of the managing team;

LAU adjusts its academic programs, reviewing the requirements regularly, adding new programs and new emphasis areas, whenever there is a need. The administrative group is always ready to experiment with new ideas and processes after studying them carefully.

The aim of the university is to capitalize on the strength that LAU has in terms of faculty, their research, and national and international visibility, to build academic programs that can compete with the best offerings in Lebanon and the region, i.e., adding new emphasis areas whenever qualified faculties are available and there is a need for such a program.

We believe that university education should be available to every qualified young person. Our main campus is in Beirut. We saw the need to grow in size and accordingly two branches, one in Saida, in the South of Lebanon, and another one in Byblos, in the eastern region of Lebanon, were established.

Our objective was to offer students employment opportunities in a new economy whose principal pillar is human capital.

In order to attract more students, thus more funds, the university offered diversified specialization areas accompanied with flexible teaching patterns to accommodate the need of the working students and the need of the business community.

Old-Time Faculty Members

All the old-time faculty members agreed with the managing team. They mentioned flexibility and competitiveness as a tool for meeting the market demand for higher education. Some of them said,

The world nowadays is like a big village, because of the development of the communication industry through Internet, airlines, etc. . . . That is why our academic programs should compete with other reputable universities around the world . . .

LAU should have the same academic standard of highly accredited universities around the world . . . The quality of our programs is focused on the need to meet the business community's requirements, and student satisfaction.

The schools are offering courses scheduled late in the afternoon in order to accommodate part-time faculty and working students.

Newly Appointed Faculty Members

The comments made by the newly appointed faculty members were similar to those of their old-time colleagues. A sample of what was said follows:

LAU is aware that an international world of learning is emerging in which academic quality must be defined in terms of merit against fast-moving, worldwide competition.

LAU has started an MBA executive program. It is specially designed to suit the timing of the graduate students, as the courses will be offered on a condensed basis, one credit per course given, on weekends.

Old and New Alumni

The majority of the alumni acknowledge the above recognizing the flexibility of the academic programs offered:

I was able to schedule my courses either very early in the morning or late in the afternoon. It was convenient because I needed to work in order to help pay my tuition fees.

If LAU did not grow, changing from a college to a university, offering program meeting the need of the educational market, it would not have been able to survive, competing with other universities located in Lebanon.

Documents: From Newspapers

Similarly, what the press wrote focused on quality, flexibility, change and improvement in the academic programs geared towards meeting competition and providing satisfaction to the students and the community. The managing group members were concerned with students' ability to find challenging job opportunities:

“We focus on constant improvement of our programs,” said the president. “We believe that only competitive universities with the ability to change quickly will be able to attract qualified students, grow and survive.” R.N. 6/3/2000, p.19.

“Competition is a drive for improvement . . . R.N. 9/5/2000, p.10.

“Our graduates have to compete with graduates from foreign universities in the national and international job market.” R.N. 6/9/1999, p. 4.

“Change is a must for growth . . . We at LAU offer diversified programs preparing graduates to meet the demand of a competitive global market. N.H. 4/2/2000, p. 8.

“I believe that competition is good because it urges us to improve our academic programs and to serve the community more efficiently.” R.N. 6/3/2000, p.18.

Document: From a Long-Range Plan Report

Similarly, Nabil Haidar, the vice president of academic affairs in the ‘Academic affairs report’, for the Spring semester 2000, said: “The mission of the university is to be responsive to the needs of Lebanon and the area in offering programs where there is proven need and the university is capable of doing exceptionally well”.

Summary and Analysis of the Findings

In order to meet the demand for university education, LAU academic programs try to compete with other programs offered by reputable universities around the world. The management group, the faculty, and the graduates realized that the world is now a global economy, and LAU students should be qualified enough to meet not only the need of the local market but the international one as well. Such a finding is backed up by Gibson, Ivancevich and Donnelly (1994) who referred to competitiveness as the ability of the university to remain a viable player in the higher education market. Meeting the demand of the local market for professional training lead to what the researcher calls ‘the ultimate criterion of effectiveness’, the survival of the university. The university, during the post-war period, developed professional schools in engineering and pharmacy and launched an

MBA executive program in order to meet the demands of the local market. The majority of the managing team, faculty members, and alumni realized the importance of offering academic programs meeting the needs of the local and international market for university education. Szekeres (2004) calls such behavior “Marketisation” and Kushner (1999) would have considered it appropriate since more weight is given nowadays to profession-driven subject matter in the overall university curriculum as a reaction to the changing population. Breneman (1994, p. 139) refers to it as a “dominant strategy needed for survival”.

In general, most of the people interviewed stated that in order to attract more students the university offered diversified specialization areas accompanied with flexible teaching patterns to accommodate working students. They recognized that because the students and their employers are becoming more demanding, the university has become very conscious in adjusting its areas of emphasis, reviewing the requirements regularly to suit the needs of the job market. For example, the university started an MBA executive program, which was designed to suit the schedules of graduate students, as the courses would be offered on a condensed basis on weekends. Similarly, the university offers courses scheduled late in the afternoon in order to accommodate part-time faculty and working students. The alumni appreciated the flexibility in the course offerings stating that it allowed them to schedule their courses either very early in the morning or late in the afternoon because they had to work hard in order to help pay their tuition fees.

At LAU, improving and changing the programs and the processes was a quality approach in education requiring flexibility in decision-making. In order to provide quality education the university had to improve the product (the programs) and the processes (the timing and scheduling of the programs) thus, meeting the demand for university education as Dill (1999) notes. Quality for an educational institution in general and for LAU in particular, means providing educational programs meeting students’ needs and expectations.

Similarly, the Lebanese press focused on change and improvement geared towards meeting competition and providing satisfaction for both students and community. In general, the press reported what the managing team had declared; basically that competition is a drive for improvement. The data gathered from the interviews, from the press and from the long-range plan, stated that the university was adjusting its academic programs by tailoring them to the needs of the students, the faculty, and the community. The competitive educational market in Lebanon, 44 universities, put pressure on LAU to improve its academic programs.

As emphasized by Johnson (1998); Galloway and Wearn (1998); Bartol and Martin (1998) and Blanchard and O'Connor (1997) things change. They are never the same again, and in order to survive institutions have to keep changing at the same rate. This agrees with what the press reported and what the managing team, the faculty and the graduates expressed in the interviews, basically that an international world of learning is emerging in which academic quality must be defined in terms of merit against fast moving, worldwide competition. Flexibility was the criteria used by LAU people in meeting competition.

Conclusion

As LAU moved farther and farther from the war years, it became more concerned with offering programs to meet the demands of the community for university education. The managing team and the faculty recognized that the university nowadays capitalizes on the strength it has in terms of faculty, their research, and national and international visibility, to build academic programs that can compete with the best offerings in Lebanon and the region. According to one female member of the management group, when LAU started new programs, its purpose was to satisfy the demand for higher education in the local market. The aim was also to achieve brain-drain reversal by creating opportunities for studying in Lebanon and thus decreasing the chances of young Lebanese men and women to go abroad and to stay there. Achieving brain-drain reversal is a patriotic issue and an ethical behavior. As mentioned before, the female members of the management group focused more on serving the community by providing good education, available to every qualified young person. On the other hand, the male members of the managing group

considered university education as a business endeavor and the curriculum as a marketable product. The researcher wonders whether this difference in opinion between the male and female members is related to gender differences in behavior. The topic can be a subject for future studies.

Changing times require changing curriculum, and this was the basic principle adopted by LAU people. The growth and survival of the university was the outcome of its meeting the growing demand for university education. The story of LAU is similar to the story of the mice in “Who Ate My Cheese” by Johnson (1998). It had to find its way through a maze of passages. Because the management team had the willingness to change, adapting the curriculum of the college according to environmental need, a door opened, not perhaps one that they themselves had thought of, but one that ultimately proved good for them. The maze (the competitive educational market) was where they looked for the survival of the university. In general, meeting the competitive educational market through a flexible and competitive curriculum can lead to the growth and survival of institutions of higher learning.

The researcher believes that as long as LAU provides the right services to the students, the faculty and the community, it will continue existing as a competitive institution. And if the larger environment rejects the Lebanese American University’s output so that students enroll elsewhere and the faculty members opt to teach in other universities, LAU will go out of business.

Appendix

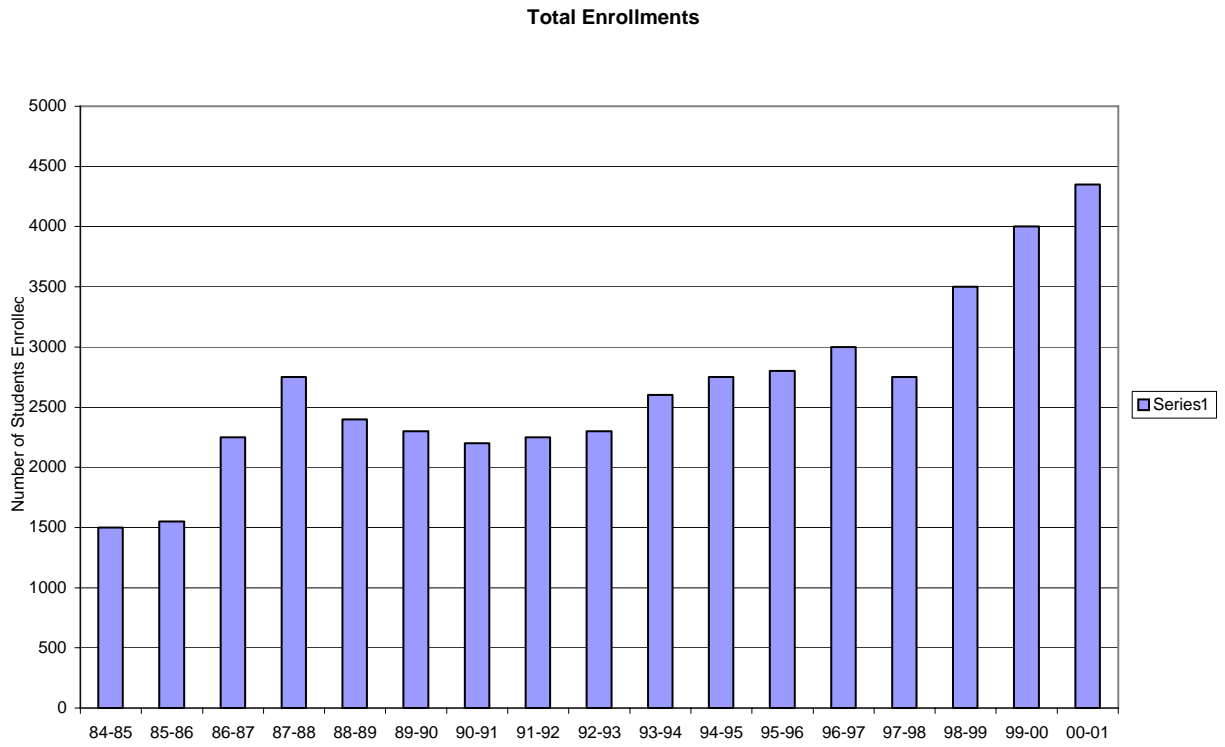


Figure-1. Total Enrollment, 1984-2001. Taken from Reports of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, 2002).

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