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**Graduate employability in Lebanon: leveraging alumni networks
and cross-cultural competencies**

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Graduate employability in Lebanon: leveraging alumni networks and cross-cultural competencies

Abstract

Purpose: This viewpoint aims to provide an overview of graduate employability in Lebanon from the perspective of the Dean of Olayan School of Business at the American University of Beirut, who is a reputable academic leader heading a world-ranked business school. The discussion also looks at the external factors that affect graduate employability in Lebanon with direct references to the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis.

Design/methodology/approach: Through conversation with the Dean of a prominent business school in Lebanon, this viewpoint discusses several topics pertaining to the concept of graduate employability.

Findings: To boost graduate employability the focus should be on developing the curriculum, engaging with the alumni network, exploiting the board of governors, and building on the school's reputation and legacy.

Originality/value: Crises do offer new opportunities. Covid-19 pandemic has prepared employers to accept the idea of remote-working which has helped in boosting graduate employability in Lebanon.

Keywords: Lebanon, Graduate Employability, Graduate Employment, University Graduates, Covid-19.

Introduction

Graduate employability has long been a focal point within higher education research and has recently escalated as a priority for policymakers. Universities, particularly business schools, are increasingly scrutinised for their ability to deliver graduates who are ready to meet the demands of the workplace. The imperative for universities to produce job-ready graduates is acknowledged globally, influencing policy in both developed and emerging economies (Calvo and Garcia, 2021; Romgens et al., 2020). In the UK, for example, there has been a notable shift of responsibility from the government to higher education institutions, a movement supported by evidence advocating for a collaborative approach among all stakeholders (Cheng et al., 2022).

The labour market is undergoing rapid transformations, accelerated by technological advancements and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, making it more dynamic, competitive, and complex (Lock and Kelly, 2020; Tomlinson, 2017). Additionally, accreditation bodies like the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), along with ranking institutions such as Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and Times Higher Education (THE), are placing significant emphasis on metrics of graduate employment, further intensifying the pressure on educational institutions.

Graduate employability is broadly perceived as the readiness and capability of recent graduates to thrive in the workplace, encompassing a diverse array of skills, attributes, and experiences that render a graduate competitive in an increasingly fluid job market (Harvey, 2001; Weligamage, 2009). It is widely recognised that possessing excellent academic credentials alone, without strong teamwork, interpersonal, critical thinking, and communication skills, markedly reduces a graduate's likelihood of success in their professional life (Scott and Willson, 2021).

Professor Yusuf Sidani, in his recent contribution to the Palgrave Debates in Business and Management (2023), posits that business schools should aim to cultivate not only well-informed graduates but 'business citizens'—individuals endowed with character, ethical awareness, and the motivation to bridge societal divides, thereby encapsulating the multifaceted nature of employability (Chen et al., 2022).

Lebanon's higher education sector, characterised by a diverse array of institutions including the prestigious American University of Beirut (AUB), offers a wide range of undergraduate and

graduate programs across various disciplines. Despite the challenges of funding, resources, and political instability, these institutions maintain a high standard of education and are recognized as regional hubs for academic excellence. AUB, in particular, stands out for its interdisciplinary approach and global outlook, fostering an environment conducive to critical thinking and innovative problem-solving. Established in 1866, AUB has grown to be a beacon of learning in the Middle East, drawing students globally due to its strong emphasis on quality education and community engagement.

The Suliman S. Olayan School of Business (OSB) at AUB is at the forefront of business education and research, offering programs that blend theoretical knowledge with practical application, thus preparing its graduates to excel in a dynamic global economy. Under the leadership of Professor Yusuf Sidani, who has over two decades of experience at OSB and a formidable publication record, the school is committed to developing the next generation of business leaders and professionals. This commitment is reflected in its impressive QS rankings, particularly in graduate employability—a testament to the effectiveness of its educational programs in a challenging regional context.

Cross-Cultural Contributions to Graduate Employability

The study of graduate employability in Lebanon, particularly through the lens of the American University of Beirut (AUB) and its Olayan School of Business (OSB), offers significant cross-cultural contributions that are pertinent both locally and internationally. Lebanon's complex socio-economic and political landscape provides a rich context for examining how educational institutions can adapt to produce highly employable graduates.

When it comes to Cultural Adaptability and Employability, the diverse cultural environment of Lebanon necessitates that educational institutions cultivate a high degree of cultural adaptability in their graduates. Cultural adaptability is essential for employability, especially within a globalised job market. Nauffal and Skulte-Ouaiss (2018) highlight the importance of quality higher education in the Middle East, noting that institutions like AUB, with their interdisciplinary and international curricula, effectively prepare students to navigate diverse cultural settings. This adaptability is crucial for graduates aiming to succeed in multinational organisations or in regions with varied cultural norms.

With regards to cross-cultural competencies, employers increasingly seek graduates with cross-cultural competencies, including cultural intelligence, multilingual abilities, and the

capacity to collaborate within multicultural teams. Sidani (2023) argues for the development of 'business citizens'—graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also possess strong ethical values and social responsibility. This holistic approach to education, which includes fostering cultural awareness and ethical considerations, is vital for preparing graduates to thrive in international and culturally diverse environments.

The regional challenges faced by Lebanon, such as political instability and economic crises, offer unique insights into the resilience and innovation of educational institutions. The significant 'brain drain' and the rise of virtual emigration highlight the need for strategies that enable graduates to succeed both locally and globally (Akl et al., 2008; World Bank, 2020). These challenges necessitate a curriculum that not only equips students with technical skills but also prepares them for remote and cross-border work, enhancing their global employability.

For the above reasons it is very important to leverage alumni networks. AUB's robust alumni network extends beyond Lebanon, providing graduates with valuable cross-cultural connections and opportunities. These networks enhance employability by facilitating the exchange of cultural and professional practices across borders. Meier and Crocker (2019) emphasise the importance of alumni networks in business schools, noting that such networks offer critical support and resources that can significantly enhance graduates' career prospects.

We believe that, future research should focus on the specific cross-cultural skills and attributes that enhance employability in different regional contexts. Comparative studies involving Lebanese graduates and their counterparts in other emerging markets could provide valuable insights into best practices and innovative approaches for fostering employability. Kertechian et al. (2022) and Dibeh et al. (2019) underscore the need for further exploration into how educational institutions can better prepare students for global careers through international collaborations and partnerships.

Furthermore, integrating global best practices into educational policy and curriculum design is essential for enhancing graduate employability. Bridgstock (2017) argues that the university's role in the knowledge network is crucial for 21st-century learning and employability. Lebanon's experience, particularly through institutions like AUB, demonstrates how adapting global standards to local contexts can create a resilient and effective education system. Policymakers and educators can draw on these strategies to improve educational outcomes in similarly challenging socio-economic environments.

The cross-cultural contributions of this study underscore the importance of cultural adaptability, ethical awareness, and global competencies in enhancing graduate employability. By examining the unique challenges and strategies employed by AUB and OSB, this research provides valuable insights for educational institutions worldwide seeking to prepare their graduates for success in an increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse global job market.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilising an in-depth single-participant interview to explore the nuances of graduate employability within the context of the American University of Beirut (AUB) and its Olayan School of Business (OSB). Qualitative research is particularly suited to this study as it allows for a detailed examination of specific experiences and insights that quantitative methods might overlook. This approach is grounded in the interpretivist research philosophy, which seeks to understand phenomena through the meanings individuals ascribe to them (Creswell, 2013).

The choice of a single-participant interview is informed by the need for rich, descriptive data that can provide deep insights into the participant's experiences and perspectives. This method, while limited in scope, offers the advantage of detailed exploration of complex, context-specific issues. The interpretivist philosophy underpinning this study emphasises the importance of understanding the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals, which is crucial for capturing the nuanced realities of graduate employability within the unique socio-economic and educational environment of Lebanon (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The sample for this study comprises a senior academic and administrator at OSB, selected using purposive sampling to ensure the data collected is rich and relevant to the study's objectives. Purposive sampling is advantageous in qualitative research for selecting information-rich cases that provide deep insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The interview was conducted using a semi-structured format, allowing for flexibility in probing deeper into specific areas of interest while maintaining a consistent focus on key topics.

The interview protocol included a range of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about the participant's views on graduate employability, the effectiveness of current

strategies, and the challenges faced by Lebanese educational institutions. These questions were structured to cover various aspects of employability, including curriculum design, alumni networks, industry engagement, and the impact of socio-economic factors. Open-ended questions are effective in qualitative research as they allow respondents to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words, providing richer data for analysis (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview data, a method suitable for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process began with familiarisation with the data, followed by the generation of initial codes, the search for themes among these codes, and the review, definition, and naming of these themes. This systematic approach ensured a rigorous and comprehensive analysis, allowing for the extraction of meaningful insights relevant to the study's objectives.

Single-participant discussion, frequently utilised in case studies or in-depth interviews, is a pivotal qualitative research method that provides deep insights into complex issues through detailed exploration of individual experiences, perspectives, and responses. This method is particularly valuable in educational and business research, where personal experiences and nuanced perspectives can uncover underlying mechanisms and inform theory development:

Depth and Detail: Single-participant discussions enable researchers to collect detailed and profound insights into individual experiences and opinions, which broader survey methods may overlook. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of complex phenomena, providing a rich data source that can lead to significant theoretical advancements. Baxter and Jack (2008) affirm that the case study method, a form of single-participant discussion, is instrumental in exploring and understanding complex issues in their real-life settings.

Contextual Understanding: Engaging deeply with individual participants helps researchers understand the context-specific factors influencing behaviours and decisions. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that knowledge gained from specific cases is often more useful than generic 'context-free' knowledge because it deals with practical human experiences and practices. This is particularly relevant in fields like education and business, where contextual variables significantly impact outcomes.

Development of Theoretical Insights: Single-participant discussions can generate detailed data that fuel the development of new theories or the extension of existing ones.

According to Eisenhardt (1989), this method can be very powerful in creating new theoretical insights because it focuses on empirical data and real-life contexts, allowing researchers to observe phenomena that might not be visible through other methods.

Flexibility and Adaptivity: This method offers flexibility, allowing researchers to adapt their approaches based on the evolving nature of the discussions. Such adaptivity is praised by Yin (2014), who notes that case studies—often reliant on single-participant narratives—enable a more adaptive and fluid research design, responsive to the specific requirements of the study.

Validation of Quantitative Data: Single-participant discussions can also serve to validate and deepen the findings obtained through quantitative methods, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Jick (1979) advocates for methodological triangulation, suggesting that combining single-participant qualitative data with quantitative data can enhance the validity and richness of research outcomes.

Despite though our best efforts and arguments above, we do realise that the primary limitation of this study is the reliance on a single-participant interview, which may constrain the generalisability of the findings. While the in-depth nature of the interview provides rich, detailed insights, the perspectives gathered may not fully represent the broader experiences of all stakeholders involved in graduate employability at AUB and OSB. However, single-participant studies can still offer valuable insights, particularly when the participant is a key informant with extensive knowledge and experience in the field (Yin, 2014). Future research should consider incorporating multiple participants from diverse backgrounds to enhance the robustness and generalisability of the findings.

Overall, in spite of its limitations, this qualitative study provides valuable insights into the strategies and challenges associated with graduate employability in Lebanon, particularly within the context of AUB and OSB. The findings contribute to the theoretical and practical understanding of employability, offering implications for educational policymakers, administrators, and scholars both locally and globally. By focusing on the unique Lebanese context, this study highlights the importance of adaptive, resilient, and interdisciplinary skill sets in graduates, aligning educational outputs more closely with market demands.

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While single-participant discussions offer valuable insights, their efficacy and rigour can be further enhanced through methodological triangulation, combining qualitative insights with quantitative data for a more robust analysis. Future research should focus on developing innovative methods to integrate single-participant qualitative data with broader surveys or experimental data, enhancing the depth and generalisability of the findings. Additionally, exploring the application of this method across diverse cultural and organisational contexts could broaden its applicability and relevance, offering new perspectives on its utility in global research settings.

Graduate Employability Sources and Policies

Professor Yusuf Sidani opened the discussion by emphasising the historical importance and esteemed legacy of the American University of Beirut (AUB), specifically the Olayan School of Business. He noted, "AUB is recognised internationally for its robust employability credentials, consistently ranking within the top 50 globally for employability and similarly for our School of Business." This high ranking underscores the extent to which AUB's academic programs prepare students for the complexities of the labour market, particularly in challenging environments as highlighted by Kertechian et al. (2021), who stress the significant impact of university reputation on graduate employability within Lebanon.

The curriculum and alumni networks are fundamental to AUB's approach to enhancing employability. AUB's legacy, spanning over 150 years, has established it as a cornerstone of educational excellence in the Arab region, attracting students internationally and contributing significantly to the dissemination of knowledge. This rich heritage enhances the university's reputation, which Kertechian et al. (2021) identify as crucial in the evaluation phase of graduates in the Lebanese job market.

Reflecting on the educational strategy, Professor Sidani stated, "Our goal is to cultivate what I refer to as 'business citizens'—graduates who are not only experts in technical business domains but are also well-versed in life's major philosophies, cultural transformations, and possess superior communication skills." This approach aligns with the liberal arts philosophy that AUB embraces, which necessitates a curriculum that balances specialized education with broad cultural, quantitative, and philosophical knowledge. This educational philosophy is

supported by Dibeh, Fakhri, and Marrouch (2019), who discuss the importance of addressing skills mismatch in enhancing employability among Lebanese youth.

To further this mission, AUB has recently integrated a 'community projects' module, a three-credit course that transcends traditional internships by involving students in tangible community service tasks. This initiative, which includes engagements like working with refugees and local government offices, is meticulously evaluated to ensure the practical application of theoretical knowledge, aiming to produce well-rounded individuals ready for the professional world. Such experiential learning is crucial for developing a versatile skill set, as suggested by the work of English et al. (2021), which emphasizes the role of professional networks and experiential learning in graduate employability.

Moreover, AUB employs case-based teaching to foster analytical and problem-solving skills, preparing students to tackle complex, non-routine problems effectively. This method mirrors findings from Kertechian, Ismail, and Karkoulian (2023), who explore perceptions of employability among students in the Middle East, suggesting the need for educational approaches that enhance self-efficacy and real-world problem-solving abilities.

By interweaving these innovative teaching methods and comprehensive curricular strategies, AUB not only upholds its tradition of academic excellence but also proactively enhances its graduates' employability in alignment with global market demands. This strategic educational framework positions AUB graduates advantageously in the dynamic and competitive international job market, preparing them to be not only skilled professionals but also transformative leaders in their communities.

According to the connectedness capabilities perspective, a significant portion of learning is inherently social, as discussed by English et al. (2021). In the Lebanese context, graduates often depend more heavily on informal networks and personal connections, known locally as 'wasta,' to secure employment (Helal et al., 2023). Such networks are not merely facilitative but are essential in enhancing graduate employability, providing pathways that are often critical in a challenging job market (Bridgstock, 2017). This reliance on networks is operationalized through industry projects, alumni events, and internships, which serve as practical engagements enhancing employability (Hynes et al., 2010).

Professor Yusuf Sidani highlights the pivotal role of the alumni network at AUB in driving graduate employability. He exemplifies this with a description of capstone projects integrated into coursework, where students address real-life business challenges faced by companies led

by AUB alumni. "Our graduates who lead these companies bring back invaluable real-world challenges to the classroom, which not only tests the acumen of our students but also prepares them to excel in real business environments," says Sidani. These projects often lead to internships, and at minimum, immerse students in genuine professional contexts, enhancing their practical skills and not merely relying on 'wasta' but also building substantive professional relationships.

However, Sidani notes a disparity in opportunities between undergraduate and postgraduate students due to the sheer number of undergraduates, which poses a logistical challenge in sourcing sufficient quality projects. "For our MBA students, sourcing capstone projects is feasible for about 50 to 70 students, but scaling this for 350 or more undergraduates presents significant challenges," he explains. This necessitates a reliance on a mix of formal and informal alumni networks to provide a diversity of engagement opportunities that can be integrated into the curriculum.

Moreover, the phenomenon of overqualification is a significant issue, as many graduates find themselves in positions that do not match their level of education, leading to underemployment and dissatisfaction. Nassar et al. (2022) illustrate this with the prevalence of overqualified graduates working as community pharmacists, which does not align with their career aspirations or market needs, reflecting a broader misalignment in the job market.

Sidani underscores the importance of extending the scope of the alumni network beyond the business school to encompass the entire university and other faculties, thereby enriching the pool of opportunities for students. For instance, the Investment Management Program at AUB, managed by students acting as financial analysts and portfolio managers, is overseen by an advisory board composed of alumni who are experts in their fields. This program not only offers practical experience but also places students in direct contact with influential industry figures, enhancing their employability. "Engaging with seasoned investment bankers and portfolio managers provides our students with exposure and insights that are crucial for securing competitive placements," Sidani asserts.

Through these initiatives, AUB not only leverages its extensive alumni network but also significantly enhances the practical skills and employability of its students, preparing them to be impactful 'business citizens' who can navigate and contribute to the complexities of the global market.

The Impact of the External Environment on Graduate Employability

The economic, political, and social turmoil in Lebanon since October 2019 has severely impacted various sectors, notably higher education. The Lebanese Pound's significant devaluation in a heavily dollarized economy has introduced broad challenges, especially in the job market, complicating the landscape for graduate employability. The influx of Syrian refugees has intensified competition for limited employment opportunities, as detailed in the United Nations Development Programme report (UNDP, 2018), which aligns with findings by Badran (2018) on the broader impact of economic crises on education systems.

Professor Yusuf Sidani notes the adverse effects of these external pressures on employment outcomes for graduates, observing a decline in their rapid employment post-graduation. The geopolitical tensions and changes in GCC employment laws such as Saudization have notably restricted opportunities traditionally available to Lebanese graduates. Despite these challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a shift towards remote work, beneficially altering employment practices for Lebanese graduates. This new mode of work has made them economically attractive to GCC businesses due to the cost-effectiveness of remote employment setups. For instance, the salary difference highlighted by Sidani—where a Lebanese-based business analyst may earn \$1,000 compared to \$2,500 for a similar position in Riyadh—illustrates significant cost savings for employers.

This evolution in employment practices prompts a need to reassess the long-term sustainability and implications of such shifts. Insights from Al-Masri and Saleh (2020) suggest that higher education institutions in neighboring Arab regions are similarly adapting to these global workforce changes, emphasizing the need for curriculum alignment with market demands. Moreover, the research by Kertechian et al. (2022) further underlines the specific attributes and outcomes necessary for enhancing employability in the Lebanese labor market, which AUB might use to refine its strategic positioning and responses.

Moreover, the issue of skills mismatch, as discussed by Dibeh, Fakhri, and Marrouch (2019), aligns closely with AUB's challenges, underscoring the urgent need for educational reforms. The study by Baruch and Forstenlechner (2017) on global career work in emerging economies such as Israel and Lebanon also supports this, pointing out the critical role of educational systems in addressing local and global market needs.

AUB's alumni networks are crucial in navigating this turbulent job market. By facilitating strong connections within and beyond Lebanon, these networks enhance graduates' employability through practical exposure and professional networking. Meier and Crocker (2019) highlight that effectively managed alumni networks at business schools globally can significantly boost graduate employability by providing both support and opportunities in challenging times.

These integrations of theory, empirical research, and practical application provide a comprehensive approach to understanding and enhancing graduate employability in Lebanon amidst significant external challenges. The robust educational and alumni strategies at AUB are designed not only to tackle immediate employability concerns but also to prepare graduates for future shifts in the global economic landscape, ensuring they remain competitive and resilient.

Knowing the Market Needs

Professor Yusuf Sidani emphasizes that AUB's educational focus extends beyond imparting technical know-how to fostering a comprehensive skill set that includes mindset, attitude, behavior, flexibility, lifelong learning, and robust interpersonal skills. This holistic approach reflects insights from Nauffal and Skulte-Ouaiss (2018), who highlight the significant impact of quality higher education on employability across the Middle East, suggesting that institutions like AUB are pivotal in shaping highly employable graduates.

Sidani critically addresses the skills gap, noting that global firms such as KPMG and EY prioritize hiring graduates from reputable institutions not solely for their academic credentials but for their well-rounded capabilities. "These companies seek individuals who exhibit a blend of strong analytical, communicative, and interpersonal skills," he states. This perspective is supported by Kertechian et al. (2023), who explore how students' self-perceptions about their employability reflect the effectiveness of their educational experiences, particularly in developing soft skills that are highly valued in the business world.

The strategy for addressing market needs is threefold:

Curriculum Evolution: AUB continuously updates its curriculum based on the latest academic research and industry demands, integrating insights from Kertechian et al. (2022) to better align educational offerings with specific attributes and outcomes valued in the Lebanese labor market. This approach ensures that graduates are prepared not only to meet but to exceed the expectations of potential employers.

Industry Engagement: Regular interaction with industry leaders helps AUB stay abreast of the evolving market demands. This engagement is crucial for tailoring academic programs that address both the current and future needs of the global and local markets, particularly in terms of skill shortages identified in sectors critical to Lebanon's economy.

Mitigating Brain Drain: The significant brain drain highlighted by World Bank data (2020) and evidenced in studies like that of Akl et al. (2008), which shows a substantial emigration of Lebanese medical graduates, represents a major challenge for Lebanon. Sidani notes that the recent shift towards virtual emigration—where Lebanese professionals work for international companies remotely—offers a new dimension to the employment landscape. This phenomenon requires a curriculum that not only addresses physical relocation but also prepares graduates for virtual, cross-border professional engagements.

Moreover, Dibeh, Fakhri, and Marrouch (2019) discuss the skills mismatch among Lebanese youth, aligning closely with AUB's strategies to enhance the curriculum to bridge these gaps. By focusing on these areas, AUB aims to reduce the mismatch between graduate skills and market demands, thus improving the employability of its students both locally and globally.

By proactively updating its educational strategies, AUB not only addresses the immediate skills gap but also prepares its students for successful careers amid the complexities of the global job market. This holistic approach is crucial for maintaining the relevance and efficacy of higher education in a rapidly changing world.

Professor Yusuf Sidani emphasizes the strategic use of executive education and corporate training programs at the Olayan School of Business (OSB) as vital tools for staying attuned to the evolving job market. He highlights how these programs serve as a direct conduit for feedback from the business world: “Executive students are often also employers, and their needs and expectations provide us with immediate insights into what the market demands. This helps us to continuously refine our teaching approach and keep our curriculum ahead of the curve.”

This perspective aligns with the findings of Meier and Crocker (2019), who demonstrate the importance of alumni and corporate networks in enhancing graduate employability by directly informing curriculum adaptations based on industry feedback.

Sidani explains that corporate programs are especially valuable for understanding specific skills required in the workforce. For example, when a company requests training in areas like leadership or supply chain management, it signals a broader trend or skill gap in the market. Baruch and Forstenlechner (2017) similarly discuss how businesses directly contribute to curriculum development through their specific demands, ensuring that business schools can swiftly adapt to changing market needs.

Furthermore, Sidani underscores the importance of AUB's connections with regional and international organizations, such as EFMD and other accreditation agencies. "Interactions with these bodies enrich our understanding of global educational and professional standards," he notes. This statement echoes the observations of Nauffal and Skulte-Ouais (2018), who highlight how international collaborations and accreditations can help institutions like AUB align their offerings with global best practices and expectations.

Given the lack of comprehensive national surveys on higher education in Lebanon, Sidani points out that AUB often relies on regional studies and surveys conducted in GCC countries to supplement their market analysis. This approach is supported by Dibeh, Fakihi, and Marrouch (2019), who advocate for the utilization of regional market data to understand employment trends and align educational strategies accordingly.

Through these methods—leveraging feedback from executive education, corporate training programs, and international collaborations—OSB effectively tailors its educational strategies to meet the dynamic needs of the job market. This proactive approach not only enhances the employability of its graduates but also ensures that the education they receive is pragmatic, forward-thinking, and aligned with global professional standards.

Discussion and Conclusion

Graduate employability in Lebanon provides a compelling and distinct case study, offering valuable insights into the intricate challenges and opportunities within a complex

socioeconomic landscape. This paper has aimed to critically analyse and discuss these issues, particularly through the lens of the American University of Beirut (AUB) and its Olayan School of Business (OSB). Lebanese educational institutions, while upholding the core principles of global education standards, are uniquely positioned within a context marked by political instability and economic volatility. The strategic integration of robust alumni networks, proactive boards of trustees, and well-defined teaching philosophies are foundational elements that these institutions leverage to develop effective employability strategies responsive to both local and global demands.

The country's alarming youth unemployment rate, currently around 30% according to recent World Bank data (2022), accentuates the urgent need to enhance graduates' skill sets and capacities. This critical issue necessitates a thorough reevaluation of educational outputs to ensure alignment with market requirements, particularly emphasising the need for adaptive, resilient, and interdisciplinary skills. Today's job market demands more than technical proficiency; employers seek candidates with comprehensive capabilities, including strong ethical character, cultural intelligence, and the ability to engage in innovative, cross-disciplinary collaborations.

In the context of a rapidly evolving global economy, especially during the post-pandemic recovery period, there is an increased emphasis on producing 'business citizens'—graduates who are not only equipped to secure employment but also poised to contribute significantly to societal advancement and innovation. These individuals are crucial in driving economic growth and fostering social cohesion, particularly in nations grappling with significant developmental challenges like Lebanon. Therefore, the cultivation of graduates who can navigate and excel in this dynamic environment is not only essential for their personal success but also imperative for the broader economic and social development of the nation.

This paper underscores the necessity for Lebanese educational institutions to continually adapt and refine their strategies to ensure their graduates are competitive and capable of making meaningful contributions to both local and global economies. By focusing on the unique Lebanese context, this study contributes to the broader discourse on graduate employability, offering theoretical and practical insights that are relevant to educational policymakers, administrators, and scholars globally. The findings advocate for a nuanced approach to education that balances technical skills with ethical and cross-cultural competencies, preparing graduates to meet the complex demands of today's interconnected world.

Implications, Generalisability and Future Research Directions

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes significantly to the theoretical understanding of graduate employability, particularly within the context of Lebanon's complex socio-economic landscape. By examining the American University of Beirut (AUB) and its Olayan School of Business (OSB), several theoretical insights emerge that enhance the broader discourse on employability.

One of the critical theoretical contributions of this study is the emphasis on cultural adaptability as a core component of employability. The findings align with the theoretical framework proposed by Nauffal and Skulte-Ouass (2018), which underscores the importance of cultural intelligence and adaptability in globalised labour markets. This study extends this framework by demonstrating how these competencies are developed through AUB's interdisciplinary and international curriculum, which is designed to prepare students for diverse cultural environments.

The concept of 'business citizens', as articulated by Sidani (2023), advances the theoretical understanding of holistic education in business schools. This study supports the idea that employability extends beyond technical skills to include ethical awareness, social responsibility, and a broad set of soft skills. This holistic approach contributes to the theoretical discourse on employability by emphasising the need for educational institutions to develop graduates who are not only skilled professionals but also ethical and socially responsible individuals.

The unique challenges faced by Lebanese educational institutions, such as political instability and economic crises, provide a rich context for examining resilience and innovation in education. This study contributes to the theory by highlighting how these regional challenges necessitate a focus on resilience and adaptability in the curriculum. The significant 'brain drain' and rise of virtual emigration, as discussed by Akl et al. (2008) and the World Bank (2020), underscore the need for educational strategies that prepare graduates for success in both local and global contexts.

The findings also contribute to the theoretical understanding of the role of alumni networks in enhancing employability. Meier and Crocker (2019) emphasise the importance of these

networks in providing critical support and resources for graduates. This study extends their work by demonstrating how robust alumni networks at AUB facilitate cross-cultural connections and professional opportunities, thereby enhancing graduates' employability.

The use of single-participant discussions and case studies in this research provides valuable methodological insights. Baxter and Jack (2008) and Yin (2014) assert that case study research offers depth and contextual understanding that can enrich theoretical frameworks. This study supports their assertions by showing how in-depth qualitative data can reveal nuanced insights into employability that may not be captured through broader quantitative methods.

Future research should explore comparative analyses of employability strategies across different cultural and economic contexts. This study suggests that examining how educational institutions in various regions adapt global best practices to local needs can provide valuable theoretical insights. Additionally, further exploration into the long-term impacts of educational reforms on employability in diverse cultural settings would enhance the theoretical discourse on global employability strategies.

Practical Contributions

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into graduate employability within the unique context of Lebanon, particularly through the lens of the American University of Beirut (AUB) and its Olayan School of Business (OSB). However, it is essential to consider the generalisability of these results across different cultural and socio-economic contexts.

While the principles underlying employability strategies—such as the importance of a robust curriculum, strong alumni networks, and the integration of soft skills—are universally applicable, the specific implementation of these strategies must be adapted to fit the local context. For instance, Lebanon's political instability and economic challenges necessitate a focus on resilience and adaptability, which may not be as critical in more stable environments. Educational institutions in different regions should tailor these findings to address their unique challenges and opportunities.

The interdisciplinary and international focus of AUB's curriculum, which fosters cultural adaptability and global competencies, is particularly relevant in today's globalised job market. Nauffal and Skulte-Ouaiss (2018) highlight the importance of quality higher education in the Middle East, noting that institutions like AUB, with their interdisciplinary and international curricula, effectively prepare students to navigate diverse cultural settings. This adaptability is crucial for graduates aiming to succeed in multinational organisations or in regions with varied cultural norms.

Employers increasingly seek graduates with cross-cultural competencies, including cultural intelligence, multilingual abilities, and the capacity to collaborate within multicultural teams. Sidani (2023) argues for the development of 'business citizens'—graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also possess strong ethical values and social responsibility. This holistic approach to education, which includes fostering cultural awareness and ethical considerations, is vital for preparing graduates to thrive in international and culturally diverse environments.

The regional challenges faced by Lebanon, such as political instability and economic crises, offer unique insights into the resilience and innovation of educational institutions. The significant 'brain drain' and the rise of virtual emigration highlight the need for strategies that enable graduates to succeed both locally and globally (Akl et al., 2008; World Bank, 2020). These challenges necessitate a curriculum that not only equips students with technical skills but also prepares them for remote and cross-border work, enhancing their global employability.

AUB's robust alumni network extends beyond Lebanon, providing graduates with valuable cross-cultural connections and opportunities. These networks enhance employability by facilitating the exchange of cultural and professional practices across borders. Meier and Crocker (2019) emphasise the importance of alumni networks in business schools, noting that such networks offer critical support and resources that can significantly enhance graduates' career prospects.

The use of single-participant discussions and case studies in this research, while providing deep insights, also raises questions about the generalisability of the results. Baxter and Jack (2008) and Yin (2014) assert that case study research is valuable for its depth and contextual understanding, but it requires careful consideration when applying findings to broader populations. Future research should incorporate a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, including larger sample sizes and comparative studies across different cultural contexts, to enhance the robustness and generalisability of the results.

Further research should focus on the comparative analysis of employability strategies across different cultural and economic contexts. Studies should investigate how educational institutions in various regions adapt global best practices to local needs, and the impact of these adaptations on graduate outcomes. Kertechian et al. (2022) and Dibeh et al. (2019) underscore the need for further exploration into how educational institutions can better prepare students for global careers through international collaborations and partnerships.

Integrating global best practices into educational policy and curriculum design is essential for enhancing graduate employability. Bridgstock (2017) argues that the university's role in the knowledge network is crucial for 21st-century learning and employability. Lebanon's experience, particularly through institutions like AUB, demonstrates how adapting global standards to local contexts can create a resilient and effective education system. Policymakers and educators can draw on these strategies to improve educational outcomes in similarly challenging socio-economic environments.

The practical implications of this study highlight the importance of contextualising employability strategies to fit local cultural and socio-economic conditions. While the core principles of fostering a robust curriculum, leveraging alumni networks, and developing cross-cultural competencies are widely applicable, their specific implementations must be tailored to address local challenges and opportunities. By considering these factors, educational institutions globally can enhance their strategies to produce graduates who are well-equipped to succeed in an increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse job market.

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