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Social Justice or ‘Human Capital’ Development through Higher Education: Experiences of Scholarship Students in Lebanon

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Abstract

While literature documents how the employability agenda has become the new neoliberal common sense in universities much less attention has been given to the mechanisms of adaptation by students. Utilizing a four-year longitudinal case study of scholarship students at an elite university, this paper focuses on the process through which this ‘meritocratic’ program normalises neoliberal common sense in higher education. We put into question the principle of positive discrimination, considering the limited number of beneficiaries. Our findings illustrate that, instead of minimizing inequalities, this scholarship program contributes in strengthening the neoliberal ideology within the education system. We further demonstrate that students’ backgrounds influence their adaptation into the program and access to employment. In addition, we argue that urban-rural differences among others have more explanatory power than class differences in understanding the complex adaptation of students into the program in the Lebanese context.

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Introduction

Critical comparative studies of higher education show that, since the 1980s, higher education institutions have come under pressure to produce graduates with skills that meet the needs of the new knowledge economy (Apple, 2006). While public funding to higher education decreases with privatisation, universities are increasingly expected to prepare the soft-skilled labour force with work-relevant skills and competencies for the service and communication sectors (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Clarke, 2017). As the employability agenda mainly characterised by self-management, leadership, entrepreneurship, team-work and quantification becomes the new common sense of higher education, it strips higher education from its central components such as self-reflection and critical awareness (Jackson, 1999). It shifts the responsibility for skill formation of individuals from governments and employers to higher education institutions (Arora, 2015). Recently, several studies – such as those by Alcántara, Llomovatte, and Romão (2013) and Torres (2013) – focusing particularly on Brasil, Mexico and Argentina in the last three decades have advanced discussions about the deep-rooted links between the employability agenda and the neoliberal common sense of higher education. This new agenda characterizes university and society relations with the market forces, stresses the importance of links between university and industry, and frequently cites the importance of human capital to serve local, regional and international ‘developments’. Burke (2016) provides a critical investigation of the widespread supposedly linear and meritocratic relationship between higher education and graduate employment and shows that despite having similar levels of

education, social class significantly influences the strategies of graduates to secure employment in the UK. Yet, these studies have a limited scope of analysis; they primarily investigate employability agenda and neoliberalism at a macro-level, and thereby, do not focus on how and to what extent the main actors of higher education, the students, internalise this new common sense. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature. Focusing on a particular scholarship program implemented within an elite Lebanese university at a micro-level, it makes significant contribution to the field by complementing earlier research. Indeed, it demonstrates that its mechanisms of action strengthen the neoliberal employability agenda by enhancing ‘human capital’ and ‘leadership’ skills of students. It further highlights the variations in the level of appropriation of these skills by students on the basis of their background and prior experiences. Drawing upon Gramsci’s (1985) concept of common sense and Bourdieu’s (1977) notions of field and capital, this study shows that the neoliberal common sense in higher education centres around the meritocratic principle. Instead, in reality, the students’ social and economic background heavily determine their adaptation to the program and their access to employment, putting into question the principle of meritocracy. It further accepts human capital development as a legitimate function for higher education studies.

In the following, we provide a snapshot of the Lebanese higher education landscape and discuss how the employability agenda has emerged as the new neoliberal common sense in higher education globally. Then, we introduce our data and method, and analyse the ways in which the scholarship program presents its main purpose in line with the new common sense of higher education. Following, we unpack how prior experiences of the students shape the level and form of their appropriation of ‘employment skills’ in the program and their employment strategies. The conclusion will make three related fundamental

arguments. First, mechanisms of propagation of common-sense discourse within higher education among students are strongly entrenched in Lebanon's historical and structural contexts. Second, while the scholarship program gives opportunities to a small disadvantaged group, it fails to take into consideration the limited number of beneficiaries in light of the large sums of money spent thus putting into question the principle of positive discrimination as a solution for broad inequalities. As such, rather than putting effort in minimizing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged, this scholarship program, we argue, contributes in strengthening the neoliberal ideology within the education system. Lastly, we argue that, contrary to the claim of the funding agency, the principle of meritocracy appears not to hold in this case, as students' backgrounds appear to influence the extent to which they seize the opportunity provided by the scholarship. Indeed, social class differences are not the only or the strongest influential factor for the adaptation into the program and access to employment in the Lebanese context.

Lebanese Higher Educational Landscape

The Lebanese educational context from primary to higher education is highly dominated by the private sector – only one of the 32 legally registered universities are public – and is characterized by a laissez faire attitude from the state. The private sector preceded the public one; the first private 'modern' universities were founded in the 1800s, while the first public university was founded in the 1900s. This delay was never caught up and was later exacerbated by globalization, reduction of public investment in higher education and intensification of international economic competition. The higher education landscape is characterized by three types of universities. The early missionary universities, founded during the 19th century, have the highest tuition fees and are still considered the

most prestigious due to their seniority and to the quality of their instruction. They maintain an upper to middle-class clientele base. A second generation of private universities recruiting on a confessional and regional basis acquired a respectable position in the landscape. Most of these have high tuition fees, are affiliated with Christian sect denominations, and follow the American model of education. A few others promote Arab and/or Islamic education. As of the year 2000, generally non-confessional, Anglophone and ‘market oriented’ universities appeared (Kabbanji, 2012). While these commercial universities facilitated access to higher education due to their moderate fees, their quality of instruction tends to be lower. The only public university, the Lebanese University, was founded in 1951. Despite its potential to offer good quality free education in a heavily privatised landscape, it is subject to political mismanagement and has not succeeded in guaranteeing optimal pedagogical and material conditions (Abourjeili, 2009). The tuition fees, which vary greatly among the universities, constitute an essential factor and contribute to inequalities based on social origin. In the absence of a centralized government financial support system, this aspect is in the hand of sectarian associations and political parties. Meritbased scholarships are rare; private universities frequently mainly offer a proportional reduction on tuition fees to their students based on financial need.

Employment as Function of Higher Education in Neoliberal Common Sense

The pressure on higher education institutions to take on a ‘business model of education’ highlights the importance of addressing graduate employability by developing knowledge and skills relevant to the labour market (OECD, 2017). Notions such as ‘human capital development’ and ‘employability’ emerged as dominant ‘normalcy’ in higher education. Gramsci’s notion of ‘common sense’ is a useful construct to understand how this ‘normalcy’ has been established. Gramsci (1985) distinguishes two regimes of power of government: domination or coercion (state-as-force), and hegemony or ‘spontaneous’ consent secured primarily in civil society and education (Femia, 1987). The latter serves

to reinforce the status quo by generating consent for acceptance of the hegemonic socio-political order without the use of force (Mayo, 2015). The growing presence of neoliberalism as dominant ideology in public policy and governance generates a new common sense for the function of higher education institutions (Torres, 2013). The neoliberal state promotes open markets, free trade, reduction of public sector, and withdraws from education the role of development of a 'critically informed mass of democratic citizens' (Baltodano, 2012). It assumes that the economic welfare of individuals and competitive advantage of nations depend on knowledge, skill and entrepreneurial workforce (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003) and shifts responsibility for skill formation to higher education institutions under the badge of 'employability' (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). The process of globalisation disperses this neoliberal notion of common sense across countries (Torres, 2013). As such, politics and programs that propose an education that is better adapted to the market are embraced. Complementary to these studies, we investigate how the particular scholarship program constructs its agenda in line with neoliberal common sense of higher education using the theory of hegemony. Furthermore, we combine it with Bourdieu's concepts of 'field' and 'capital' to understand how the capitals possessed by students interact with the 'doxa' – or the set of rules in this field (Bourdieu, 1977) – and shape their adjustment to the program and prospective employment strategies. Using these concepts, we demonstrate that the capitals the students possessed were valued and devalued differently within what we consider to be a new field of action (Bourdieu, 1977). While the concept of equality of opportunity and meritocracy in the democratic and modern school system assumes perfect competition between students who are otherwise unequal, the principle of positive discrimination follows a logic of distributive justice and involves compensating for social inequalities by giving more to those who have less.

Though positive discrimination is necessary to provide structural conditions for radical, transformative change towards equality (Noon, 2010), it has been argued that positive discrimination alone, as is the case of this scholarship program, is not sufficient. It does not eliminate inequalities, as its impact is very limited (Dubet & Duru-Bellat, 2004).

Data and Method

This qualitative longitudinal case study was carried out over four years between 2010 and 2014 and is independent from the evaluation process set up by the donor agency as part of the project. It draws on empirical materials collected in various ways. We conducted a desk study for analysing the language and jargon used in the request for proposal of the international development agency for the scholarship program. We looked into the way language is used as a tool to manipulate belief systems and common sense concerning the function of higher education. Special attention was paid to how the scholarship program defines the role of education and proposes a mechanism of action to eradicate inequality and increase employability.

We conducted in-depth repeated interviews with 34 of the scholarship students out of 65 students. Stratified random sampling ensured the representation of geographical origin, gender and major in the sample. Interviews covered biographies and experiences at the university of the scholarship students. We supplemented the interviews with systematic observations of the students from their recruitment to the program to their access to employment after university. In addition, we analysed a variety of data from application forms to evaluation sheets. We also interviewed instructors, student life representatives and the rector. These interviews covered topics such as the mission of the program, as well as performance and adaptation of students to the program. They were particularly helpful for

understanding the discrepancies between the students' own reports about their adaptation to the program and how others in more authoritarian positions see and interpret it. The interviews were conducted in a mix of Arabic, English and French. The audio-recorded interviews with students generated around 535 pages of text in single space. We applied the thematic method of content analysis detecting and isolating the most recurrent themes in interviews and comparing with other interviews.

Manufacturing Consent: Definition of the Problem and Modification of Common Sense

The scholarship program examined here was introduced in 2010 and funded by an international development agency. It is implemented at three selective and private universities in Lebanon, following the American liberal arts model of instruction, requiring students to acquire general culture and develop reasoning and communication skills. During the first year of the program, a total of 13.5 million dollars was granted to fund the undergraduate studies of 117 students to cover for the entire three to four-year cycle of undergraduate studies in all three granted higher education institutions. It has continued to offer such large sums over the years. We can see that the funding level is exceptionally high, as these universities are among the most reputable yet most expensive in the country.

The scholarships cover tuition fees, accommodation and stipend. This program represents a change in comparison to the way the agency offered funding to these universities before 2010. While financial need was the major criterion before, it changed into a competitive system of request for funding accompanied with a heavy follow-up by the agency, giving it more control in the transformation of the beneficiaries. It selected students based on financial need, ensuring gender and geographical representation. To be

eligible, students had to have obtained at least a slightly above average grade in high school and passed an English proficiency test. While the program aims to promote social and economic justice in Lebanon, we argue that it spreads and strengthens, and thus legitimizes, neoliberal common sense of higher education. The agency's call for proposal for the scholarship program introduces a specific understanding of educational inequalities:

Overall, the quality of private education is higher than public education, with the gap decreasing in the secondary stage and then increasing tremendously at the higher education stage. This results in increased gaps between the more economically advantaged youth and their poorer counterparts who cannot afford quality private education. This is also reflected in significant differences in graduates' employment potential for more productive and profitable jobs.

As such, the essential problem becomes the fact of not being able to afford private education, and it overlooks the option of public university which offers free education to all, as a way to promote equality. The default option as presented in this call for proposal consists of placing disadvantaged students into private education rather than improving free public university education. This clearly demonstrates the dominance of neoliberal understanding of education of reducing public expenditure on public education, to the profit of the private sector. As such, the option of using the money more sustainably to improve an existing free public education institution is omitted. Though the public university in Lebanon is subject to mismanagement and unable to guarantee optimal pedagogical and material conditions for instruction (Favier, 2000), such large sums of money over several years could have contributed to a more systematic and sustainable long-term solution as an alternative.

In addition, the call links differences in access to higher education to access to ‘more productive and profitable jobs’, thereby, presenting the purpose of higher education as the development of human capital and employability skills:

The program has a significant role in supporting the improvement of Lebanon’s human capital.

The call assumes that ‘skill’ and ‘human capital’ have a shared meaning and, this way, spreads and consolidate the ‘validity’ of these concepts and manufacture consent concerning their definitions. As the call goes on, the consent securing mechanisms, in Gramscian terms, and consolidation of the neoliberal common sense of higher education becomes even clearer;

Universities should demonstrate their ability to provide scholarships to students in fields that directly link to current market demands so that graduates will more easily find employment.

The request for proposal of the international development agency uses a discourse and language to manipulate belief systems and the ‘common-sense’ values concerning education, equality and employability. As shown in the quote above, it does not refer to self-reflection and critical awareness but rather delimits the major tasks of universities as graduate employability. It should be noted that while liberal arts education in general appears not as aggressively employment oriented, the program induces such an employability agenda to the three universities and in this way strengthens the business model of education in line with the neoliberal market. Ball (2012) argues that the philanthropiccapitalist programs utilize a language of disadvantage, inequality, leadership alongside social equality, democracy, quality and efficiency and they transform the

common sense concerning the meanings of these terms in a neoliberal way. Corroborating his findings, the program call explains the purpose of the program, as follows:

This current program aims to ... develop the potential of the economically disadvantaged to contribute to the development of Lebanon... This can help break the cycle of poverty, develop a more functional democracy, and sustain a more competitive, open economy in Lebanon.

The call installs a conception of the world consistent with American economic, political and military power and deepens consensus and support for it by performing in a ‘democratic’ way. The program does not only give funding in the form of social assistance program, as many palliative philanthropic programs do, but it gives and actively expects a return on donations, which indicates a developmental ‘philanthrocapitalist’ giving. As such, the donation turns into an investment which would yield a return over the long term. In other words, this business model of giving or ‘philanthrocapitalism’ requires direct relation of giving and outcome (Ball, 2012). Indeed, the agency expected to receive ‘success stories’ monthly, which highlight the influence of the program on the daily lives of its beneficiaries. In addition, it required a periodic evaluation process covering academic and extracurricular components of the program.

Uneven Transformation of Scholarship Students

The scholarship program works on students by reducing the role of the academic aspect while shifting focus on extra-curricular activities and leadership positions. It moves them beyond the school logic to act as future members of the corporate world. It works within a ‘total institution’ to provide, through both formal and ‘hidden’ curricula, a strong secondary socialization model for students (Van Zanten, 2011). The program aims to form

individuals who master the English language and active pedagogy, acquire an autonomous way of thinking, participate in collective activities and progressively hold 'leadership' positions. As such, success is defined according to a system of values specific to the American culture such as autonomy, individualism and initiative.

Behind a discourse of meritocratic equality of chances, differences emerged in the way in which students developed and transformed, some adapting more than others to the program requirements, we argue, depending on their previous experiences and trajectories. The capitals they possessed were valued and devalued differently within what we consider to be a new *field of action* (Bourdieu, 1977) shaped by the rules of the scholarship program within the elite university. In this section, we examine the inequalities that are revealed through this process.

Inequalities in Acquisition of Communication and Autonomy Skills

Students are generally required to acquire skills and norms related to studies in order to succeed (Tinto, 1999). We observed differences in the way students adapted to the Liberal Arts model instruction and its implicit norms. Variations appeared in the level of acquisition of communication skills such as participation in classroom discussion, and study autonomy skills such as note-taking and critical thinking. However, these skills largely depended on their proficiency in English, in terms of development of ideas and structuration of sentences, in favour of those who attended Anglophone schools. In addition, those who had been exposed to these types of practices internalized the program principles more strongly.

Competence in English language played an important role as of the selection phase. It continued to play an important role throughout the university experience for scholarship

students in their performance in general. Students from francophone schools experienced hardships with language. Amira, from a village in South Lebanon, faced difficulties during the English Intensive year at university, her instructors indicated that she was among the weakest in class. Once she joined the regular program, her instructors were initially dissatisfied as she ‘participates in Arabic in the classroom’ instead of participating in English like the other students. The language barrier did not allow her to communicate her level of cultural capital, though at school, she was known as the best student in Arabic literature, with the support of her father, an Arabic teacher. These findings are in line with those by Moskal (2016) who notes that non-native students obtain fewer benefits from their cultural capital than their native peers. Amira worked hard, seizing every occasion to practice her English, and asking her teachers for extra homework. As she progressed, her instructors started to appreciate her pertinent participation in class. Two years later, her grades improved: she went from an average of 75 to 86 over 100 and figured on the honour list. Mounia, a student in Medical Laboratory Sciences also from a francophone school in a city in North Lebanon, employed strategies to adapt and managed to succeed with very high grades. She says:

There was always a dictionary next to me, for example for scientific terms, the liver (said in English) it's liver (said in French), me, I would look for it directly

Competence in English also played a role in their participation in class and note-taking skills. According to instructor evaluations, the scholarship students generally participated less than others in class discussions. Indeed, while the scholarship students are all from public high schools, a condition required by the program, the regular students at the university are in majority from private schools. In addition, while the scholarship

students are more often from rural regions, the regular students are in great majority from Beirut and its suburbs. The quality of foreign language instruction in public schools, especially in distant rural regions, is generally lower. Students who were in Anglophone schools, particularly those from Beirut, had more ease participating in an ‘intelligent’ way, according to their instructors.

However, participation also had to do with the pre-requisite skills of moving beyond the strict program and required ‘critical thinking skills’. According to their intercultural studies instructor, scholarship students, in particular, struggled as they tended to memorize. She expresses it as follows:

In my course, knowing the history, reading the books is only the basis. Each student is required to develop a critical way of thinking, analysing and thinking. This course allows them to exercise their skills of presenting in class, their self-confidence, their voice, how to simplify and present their ideas in front of the whole class.

She finds that though scholarship students work seriously and are conscientious, they sometimes perform poorly. She reports:

They tell me: ‘we are used to having good grades, we do not understand why in this course’. They are shocked because what used to work in school and led to good grades does not work anymore, their study system works against them.

In their opinion, this difference can be explained by the type of trajectory and school experiences - public schools among scholarship students versus private, elitist schools among some regular students. According to an instructor of intercultural studies:

The lack of critical thinking does not only affect the scholarship students but all students who follow the Lebanese program, as opposed to those who come from the Protestant College or International College (both private elitist schools who follow the French and American system respectively).

Indeed, while public schools solely adopt the Lebanese system, which has not been updated since the 1990s, the elite schools adopt a French, British or American system and focus on developing similar skills to those required in elite universities.

At university, students were also required to take notes independently in class. Systematic note-taking depended on the possession of advanced English language skills for students to be able to follow teachers' remarks and rapidly note them down. It also depended on previous experience in schools with this kind of practice.

Farida, business student, distinguishes herself through her mastery of note taking which translates into good results. She attributes it to her previous experience with a teacher in her high school.

They (the teachers at school) wrote everything on the board, but there were some things, especially in Biology...she would talk to us, she taught at the Arab University, so when she would talk, she would tell us this information is additional, don't write it... and me, this type of thing I would like a lot, so each word that she would say, me... my head was in the notebook.

This experience seems to have distinguished her from others once at university. As such, it appears that variations emerged among students in terms of the way they responded to the academic requirements and this appeared to depend on their previous experiences and social backgrounds. Those who had been in schools in which the level of instruction in

English was good were favoured; those from urban background or from private schools earlier in their trajectory, namely elite schools.

Inequalities in Acquisition of ‘Leadership Skills’

In parallel to studies, the call for proposal encouraged extra-curricular involvement to ensure the personal development of students, as follows:

This support will help them gain leadership skills and other skills necessary for their becoming leaders in their society...Students will be required to engage in some type of ‘leadership in action’ activities annually.

The non-academic qualities, such as ‘leadership’ competencies, were rendered legitimate as of the selection phase in the interviews. This strategy, also known as ‘socializing descolarization’ (Garcia, 2010) allows for flexibility with regards to study requirements to neutralize the academic game with the goal of adapting them to the values of the corporations.

While the host university provided a diversity of student life associations, the program imposed on students the participation in at least one of the student life clubs and encouraged them to progressively hold positions of responsibility such as treasurer or representative.

The degree of engagement in these activities was variable from one student to another and largely depended on experience with social diversity, level of conservatism and geographical origin. In terms of the latter, we particularly note the divide between urban and rural contexts. In a Lebanese context, the former allows for more heterogeneous social interaction with a diversity of profiles, while the latter tends to be characterized by

homogeneity in terms of social class, and confessional belonging. For instance, Nadine, from a Christian homogenous village, though close to Beirut, said that she had been 'very shocked' at her arrival to university by the number of veiled girls. These would either isolate themselves or would regroup with other students who share the same geographical and social origin.

It appeared that with some exceptions, most scholarship students faced difficulties to adapt to the new environment at the beginning. However, the strategies adopted by scholarship students were not fixed through the university years but changed according to situations. For instance, Amira, from a small village near the southern border of Lebanon, tried to progressively go out from her dormitory room after the first semester, she even attempted to organize activities in the dormitory, namely a general culture quiz night. However, on an occasion, she confronted another resident who was presenting a comedy show which Amira considered offensive of her religious beliefs. Consequently, the residents divided into two groups, whereby the majority turned against Amira, which led to further isolation. According to the head resident of the dormitory, she went back to her home more often, trying to avoid social encounters. Amira expressed it as follows:

The atmosphere in the dormitory has become very difficult... I feel they are all scared of me.

The confessional homogeneity and degree of traditionalism of her village of origin contrasted with the mixed environment at university, which influenced her social relations and led to her relative isolation. Her level of conservatism also influenced her choice of clubs and limited her engagement in extracurricular activities. Her choice reveals the limits imposed by her religious practices, including not being allowed to listen to music. She

could not join dance club, social activities club or sports club. Instead, she joined an association that does charity work, but loosely participated; she attended meetings, sitting on the side with a few other religiously conservative girls. Indeed, in her previous experiences, she had had very few opportunities to participate in collective activities. The behaviour of other students belonging to the same profile, rural traditional, was similar in terms of social isolation, weak engagement in clubs and overinvestment in studies.

In contrast, some engaged more intensively in social activities. Their involvement in extracurricular activities allowed them to meet people outside their ordinary circles and thus helped them to build social capital. This was the case of Farida, Muslim Shiite from a low-income neighbourhood in Beirut. She distinguished herself by her great sociability. She quickly developed friendships with different types of persons in terms of confessional background, age and sex. She made use of her social relations to work in groups, to obtain information about university life, choice of courses and to make future plans in the field of finance. She also engaged in student life activities and took charge of the financial aspects in projects and was often favourably evaluated by her mentors as an ‘active member’. In her interview, she tells about how she chose to adhere to a social activity club with her friends ‘as a group’ since the first week.

This appeared to be common among urban students (mainly from Beirut, the capital) who benefitted from the diverse school offer and the access of information to make future plans. At university, these students were more likely to grasp all aspects of the opportunity. In this case, being from Beirut, Farida had benefitted from the social diversity at her school, which made her social adaptation at university easier and reflected on her active participation in student life in contrast with Amira’s case.

In some cases, engagement in extra-curricular activities even came at the cost of studies. Issam, a young man from a Sunni family of Beirut, participated in the student life at university, occupied positions of responsibility in clubs and spent time with friends at the expense of studies. According to his mentors, he is ‘very sociable and active’. It was a conscious choice for him:

I was in 6-7 student clubs and who knows what, I overload myself...I had not put in mind that I needed to excel, that I have to show that, that I cancel all of my social life... I noticed to what point that (participation in activities) was important, for the personality, even in the way of speaking to people.

This case was common among those who had an unstable school trajectory in an urban environment. The frequent school changes of Issam weighed on him and led to his disengagement from studies. The instability however exposed him to a great deal of cultural diversity, which facilitated his social adaptation.

The specificity of the Lebanese context combined with the urban-rural divide created a gap between scholarship students who had experience with social diversity in terms of confessional and social origin and those who had not. Experience with diversity was more common among those from the capital or from larger cities, as is the case of Farida and Issam. They could then benefit from the opportunities, as they both developed strong dispositions towards sociability and collective activities.

Degree of Adherence to Program Values: A Condition for Access to the Global Market

Framed within the almost exclusively privatized educational sphere and liberal market forces where collegial bonds play an essential role, the ‘meritocratic’ program

allowed underprivileged students to access to a prestigious university. However, our longitudinal data reveals that the supposedly linear and meritocratic relationship between their higher education and graduate employment proposed by the official discourse of the program does not entirely mirrors how the graduates entered the labour market. The differences again emerged in the way students benefitted from university on the basis of background and prior experiences to attain their goals, sought internships that brought them closer to their career ambitions and maximized their chances of access to positions with a possibility of career progression.

Effect of the Program on the Transition to Labour Market

The university experience allowed students who were the most actively engaged to connect to the labour market. It allowed them first to accumulate social capital, mobilize it to obtain information about career possibilities and develop skills required on the job market.

Social bonds that formed during the university years translated into advantages in the job market for some. The strong sociability of Farida for example translated since the first day into a quest for information, which helped her acquire university norms. She became friends with students with whom she studied, some in the same year as her, and others from earlier cohorts. As such, her sociability pushed her forward, she was able to gain information for her future plans: she was always looking for internship opportunities and would ask her older friends about professional certification exams. She had completed an internship at the Central Bank during her third year of study and had researched further options. She described them as follows in her interview:

There was a girl with me, she had interned at (name of the commercial bank), at first, they put her as cashier, then client service, she told me 'I learned to do everything', she took 2 months... She told me the commercial bank is very good, so I want to do that too.

As the quote evidently suggests, social networks cultivated in the program affect the subsequent transition process to the labour market. Farida relied on her network and constantly activated the available resources to learn about potential barriers and opportunities and to shape her internship strategies. She also mentioned getting support from another friend, Adel, who had started his studies a year earlier.

There is Adel now at (name of another bank), I can ask him when he went. He helps me a lot, Adel, it is even him who told me to apply to the central bank, I did not know about it.

Upon graduating, Farida started the internship at the commercial bank, as she had planned and subsequently was offered a full-time position.

It also appeared that participation in extracurricular activities also worked directly on the development of skills that were useful in the labour market. This was particularly appreciated by teachers in business studies, often failing to recognize the variations that emerged within the group of students in the extent to which they embraced these skills. A marketing instructor expressed it as follows:

I am very happy that they stepped out of the limits of university, that they became more entrepreneurial, that they attend workshops, that they have become active outside of university.

Students who developed these skills were also able to translate them into benefits in seeking internship and entering the job market. Issam (described above), who focused on extracurricular activities instead of studies, expressed that his experience at university allowed him to change and develop especially in the 'way to talk to people', which made up for the fact that his grades were average. He was able to convince a recruiter to offer him an internship in a renowned company. He describes his experience as follows:

For example, (name of the company), they had said no to me and Mazen at the beginning, you are not accepted. So, I spoke to her again, I told her, please do not judge us because of our grades, I spoke to her in a serious manner, she was really nice, she said 'alright, I will reconsider the decision, I will check with my colleague'. I felt that it was the way of talking, negotiating that had this effect.

He ended up being accepted for an internship at that prestigious company and found a job immediately upon graduation.

Variation in Degree of Adherence to Values and Future Plans

The program achieved a high degree of adherence especially among students from social environments that are conducive to adaptation to the neoliberal labour market. In the meantime, others, despite having obtained high grades, could not access the types of employment that match the values or "common sense" of the program. There were however cases in which the values propagated by the program progressively impregnated the way of thinking and modified attitudes towards future plans despite the social environment. Lamis, from a traditional family in Beirut, whose father used to prohibit her from participating in extracurricular activities while she was in school, experiences change once at university. She explains it as follows:

The sessions changed my vision of life, I used to say before maybe that I would get married and stay at home, that I would not work, but now, no, I became... I want to work.

She finds a job immediately upon graduating in another prestigious university on a similar program for several years and progressively gains responsibilities. A student, Mahmoud, from the southern suburb of Beirut, who had previously been exposed to similar programs, totally adhered to the values. He described the program as follows:

I think that this is what the program focuses on. It is not just about doing well in class, the objective of the agency is to create leaders, pioneers in their community.

He engaged in the process fully, carried out an internship at a prestigious auditing firm during his study, with the help of his aunt who had worked at this company. He found a job before he graduated in which he gained experience until he was offered a position in the same prestigious firm.

The internalization of values was most often found among students who are from a social environment that is conducive to appropriate the norms of and adapt to the neoliberal labour market, this included being from urban area and/or having the right social capital, as Mahmoud, or the disposition to build social capital once at university. In contrast, other students, such as Amira mentioned above, who had invested in studies but were the least active in student life and adhered the least to the values promoted by the program, struggled at the entry to the job market, despite their good grades. Amira applied and was not accepted to an NGO whose values echo the ones cultivated by the program studied here, as graduates are trained to promote values such as initiative and meritocracy in rural areas

with the goal of reducing inequalities. Instead, students who were selected were often those who were the most immersed in the university culture.

She could not understand the reason for her rejection. As a default plan, she ended up pursuing a master's program at the Lebanese (public) University. Alternatively, students who correspond to this profile gave priority to personal goals at the expense of projects that are more coherent with the objectives of the program. Layla from a conservative Druze family from a village in Mount Lebanon did not engage much with the program at university and socialized only with other students from her region. She would attend extracurricular activities to fulfil the requirements of the program but not engage fully, as demonstrated in the use of pronoun 'they' from which she excludes herself when she describes it as follows:

They did a lot of things. It is true that I could not participate in everything, but there were beautiful things, they even went to plant trees and they went to clean something, they did a lot of beautiful things.

At the time of the interview, she wanted to find a job in her field of study, at a bank near her village of origin, never considering the option to move to the capital, Beirut. Her rural social background and 'feminine' dispositions inscribed on her career choices and on her actual future, as she chose a traditional lifestyle. Immediately after graduating, she got married to a young man. She got pregnant shortly after and declared wanting to help her husband run the village supermarket.

The differences that emerged among the students in the way they projected into the future could be explained by differences in the way they experienced university, and by characteristics of their social backgrounds. Some were more conducive than others to

adaptation to the neoliberal labour market and favoured the internalization of the values of the program. These may have also contributed to different expectations that are inscribed in the form of permanent dispositions that limit the foreseeable horizon as per the thesis advanced by Bourdieu (2002), and to various levels of information regarding the job market and respective expectations.

Conclusion

The scholarship program, studied here, was implemented in a context in which private elite higher education institutions are largely inaccessible to socially underprivileged individuals. We demonstrate that in reality the program, under the label of 'meritocracy', reinforced neoliberal common sense which is already dominant in the education context of Lebanon. Contrastingly, across the world, student movements emerged against the effects of neoliberalism in education for instance through the implementation of privatisation and marketization of education policies reducing the function of education to the employability agenda (Alcántara et al., 2013; Scacchi et al., 2017). Historically, though resistance to neoliberal approaches has emerged from time to time calling for social justice in Lebanon, it was never pursued. While this requires further research, we believe that the absence of resistance is strongly engrained in historical and structural contexts of the country. In that context, neoliberal policies are tradition and private schools and universities were formed earlier and maintain a higher position than the public ones. We argue that the strong neoliberal orientation in the country is a major underlying factor in the reinforcement of consent promoted by the program. While the scholarship program gives opportunities to a small disadvantaged group, it benefits a very limited number of beneficiaries in light of the large sums of money spent. This puts into

question the principle of positive discrimination as a solution for broad inequalities. As such, rather than putting effort in minimizing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged, this scholarship program contributes in strengthening the neoliberal ideology within the education system. Indeed, while this large sum of funding could be effectively used for improving quality and scope of public education to narrow the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged, it was spent in line with new neoliberal common sense.

Further, contrary to the claim of the funding agency, the principle of meritocracy appears not to hold in this case, as students' backgrounds appear to influence the extent to which they seize the opportunity provided by the scholarship. Indeed, in addition to social class differences, urban-rural differences emerge as essential factor for the adaptation into the program and access to employment. Students from urban areas tend to be more exposed to diversity and this works for their benefits, even if they are socioeconomically more disadvantaged than their counterparts from rural areas. Whereas, others, from rural backgrounds, with low exposure to social diversity and from conservative families were the least engaged in the process and mainly focused on their studies. These findings lead us to question the positioning of higher education in promoting social mobility and in developing human capital in meritocratic way. Interestingly, while we observed differences in the degree of adaptation to the program and in prospective employment trajectories among students, these never appeared critical nor resistant to the neoliberal common sense of the program. They took full responsibility for their successes and failures in entering the job market.

Notes

The names of concerned individuals and institutions are not divulged to preserve the confidentiality, maintain trust between the author and the institutions and preserve the integrity of this paper.

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