
New challenges and opportunities of Continuing Education Programs in Lebanon

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Abstract. By establishing regional continuing education centers across Lebanon, a country characterized as a fragile state with an unstable political environment, a private university's continuing education (CE) unit faces new challenges and opportunities. Following a methodology aimed at minimizing known uncertainties, three central themes had been acknowledged to underscore the resolution of a higher education private institution in strategically expanding its outreach programs. The first relates to the university's adaptation, as an organization, of an effective administrative arrangement in response to the nature of the new external environment it is now engaged in. The second concerns the uncertainties associated with choosing strategic regional allies as partners in the expansive CE strategy to best serve the communities. The third involves strategic knowledge management challenges and related strategic solutions to attend to client's demands. By tackling the known uncertainties associated with the new external environment, it is argued that the university's ability to bring in social returns could well be enhanced. We conclude with shared lessons that would guide decision makers, strategic planners and university administrators with respect to steps and approaches as they may face in similar situations.

Key words: Continuing Education, Life Long Learning, Strategy in Education, Entrepreneurship, University Administration, Strategic Planning and Alliance.

1. INTRODUCTION TO CONTINUING EDUCATION

Lifelong learning and continuing education are two labeled sides of the same coin. The underlying philosophy is rooted in the paradigm that investment in education or human capital is an important source of economic growth [4]. In practice, CE programs act as a pathway and comprises of a platform, linking the individual's achievement to date with a chosen career path. In reality, a division of Continuing Educations Program, as part of a university setting, partners with various stakeholders from the professional communities to leverage in the program delivery process. The partnership zone aims at sharing knowledge, experience, ideas and resources, and it focuses on building skills, on increasing knowledge and on developing abilities of the participating individual through specifically designed programs, called continuing education programs. In its entirety, the partner list varies but generally includes links to international organizations, professional associations, industries, businesses, local government, primary and secondary education, in addition to health and social services.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON LEBANON AND CE IN LEBANON

Lebanon is a small Arab country with a culture marked by strong western influences that date back to the dawn of the previous century. It is the most heterogeneous of all Arab countries with a population consisting mainly of Muslims and Christians, (19 officially recognized religious sects). The political system follows a mandate of confessional distribution of power based on religious affiliation [1]. After the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil wars, Lebanon has emerged after a series of conflict and wars, with a multi-confessional society. Given the

accumulated demographic pressure, the refugees living on its soil, the group grievances, the human flight, in addition to external interventions, Lebanon is highly vulnerable to conflict and failures and has been recognized as a “fragile state”. Lebanon ranks 43 out of 177 states on the 2011 Failed States Index [8]

It is against this backdrop that a private university in Lebanon has been offering on its main campus and for over twenty five years, non-credit based continuing education programs. Growth in the unit has been increasing over the past five years. The CE unit currently offers 30 various professional programs for the different communities it serves. (See fig. 1 as an example). Aggregate key performance indicators have been very encouraging. Overall enrolment doubled over the last four years, new programs have escalated and an unparalleled capacity building in CE faculty support has been provided by the university, along with CE quality controls and assurances.

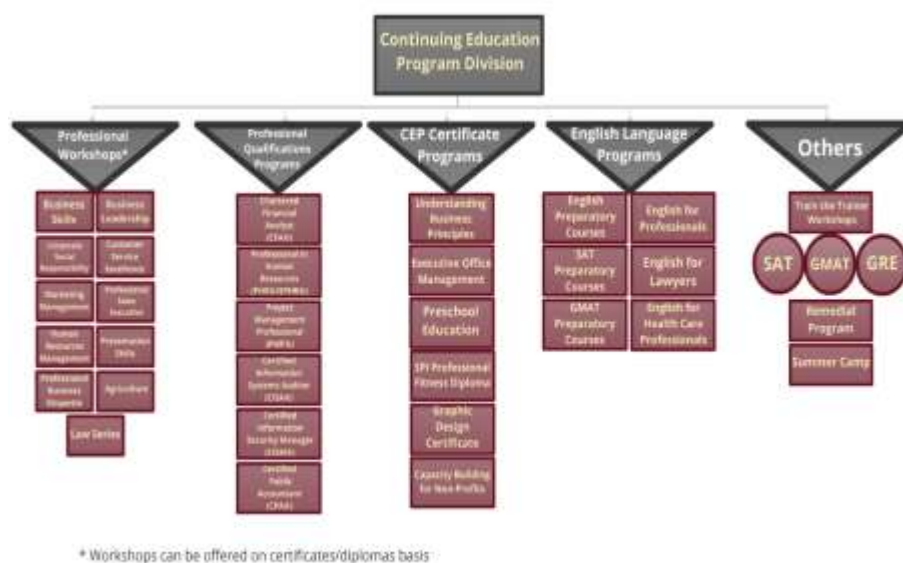


Fig.1 CE program classifications and offered CE programs

2.1 Reasons for CE programs popularity

Popularity is explained by three factors (See fig. 2 for LAU's popularity in CE enrollment across the offered program classes). The first relates to the nature of the CE certificate programs. Program duration is normally one year or less, associated fees are relatively low and CE certification has a positive influence upon graduation. Indeed, collected CE statistics at Lebanese American University (LAU) on selected programs averages over 90% employment upon graduation. Additionally, CE programs are offered after employees' working hours, providing much needed flexibility for working individuals. Programs are also offered through university instructor participations and are driven by professionally related learning objectives.

The second factor concerns the individual's work related necessities in today's competitive economic environment. An investigation of many who join professional qualification programs suggests that the demand for an advanced degree in professional

circles is driven by the short life cycle of a traditional academic degree, perceived as rather obsolete 3 to 5 years after graduation, and in a constantly demanding job market.

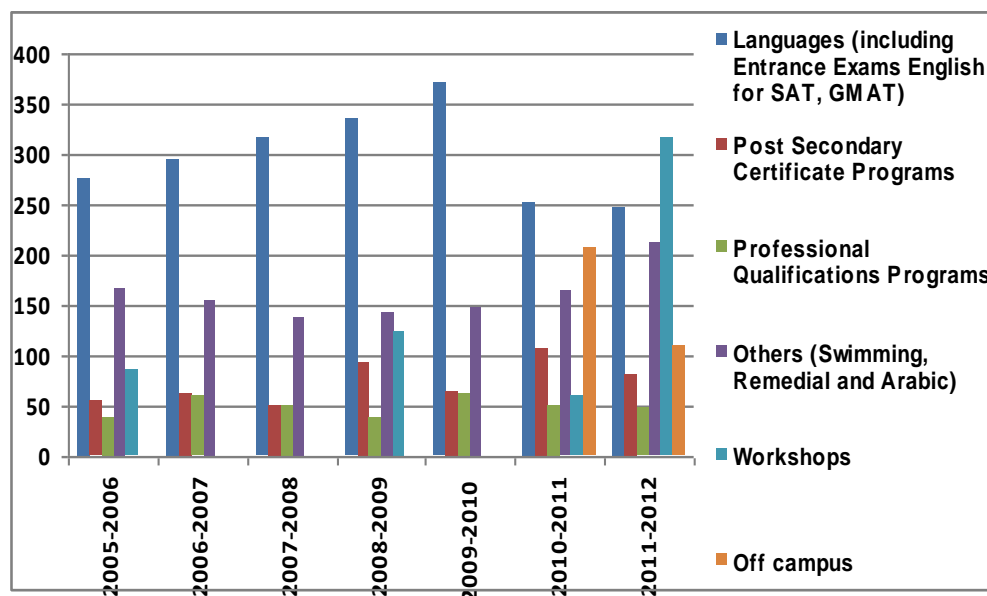


Fig.2 Distribution of CEP attendees in various CE program classifications

Additionally, CE participants are exhibiting a more serious and mature attitude concerning their career choice. In contrast, many Lebanese individuals joining a university's academic program for the first time after high school graduation are compelled to join a higher academic institution with prevailing parental influence, a popular youth related habit in the middle-east.

The third factor is market driven. The need for closing the gap between the academic and the professional world requires youth to be retrained in order to acquire a broad set of skills as they enter the labor market [15]. In this aspect, many CE programs ensure alignment between skills acquired in the schools and skills demanded in the marketplace. Certain market jobs are restricted to individuals with Professional Qualifications such as professional positions at the Central Bank of Lebanon. Constant changes in market requirements, higher pay job incentives and noticeable high unemployment rate, all translate into more demands for CE programs.

In sum, and using Maehl's words [13], "the numerous career changes that adults now experience, whether or not they remain with the same employer, contribute to the sense of impermanence. All workers, not just professionals, face escalating demands for higher credentials and more capability, and job changes are more frequent for many people. The need for continual upgrading has spread from managerial and supervisory to the entire workforce".

3. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER: NEW CHALLENGES IN CE PROGRAMS

As the university expands its outreach programs outside the university walls by establishing regional CE centers across the country through strategic alliances, we raise concerns in response to the new challenges faced by the external environment. The university's external CE mission is now more and more associated with notions like serving the other, promoting

regional stability [15] and enabling adults to gain necessary skills to match local market demands. Such an expansive strategy may have an immediate impact on the ground if it translates into choosing an effective regional partner among the prominent NGOs and educational establishments in the Lebanese regions. The paper aims at providing strategic solutions to the known uncertainties of the strategic alliance.

An alliance between the university and a regional strategic partner can be characterized as a relatively easy start-up operation and can be concluded in a relatively short negotiation period through win-win-win (university, partner, and client) contractual agreement. The strategic alliance is then a function of the cross cooperative venture, the inherent competencies of the partners and the internal/external network the alliance may bring to the table. The benefits are remarkably stated. In relying on the partnership strategy, the newly created CE Centers gain a lever through the physical space offered at the partner's site, profit from an accelerated speed to immediately start offering CE programs and serve the community closer with practically no start-up costs [14]. However, new sets of risks can be encountered through such alliance.

4. RESPONSES TO NEW CE CHALLENGES

4.1 Methodology for new risk identification

If we postulate that the university's total social and economic return through CE outreach is the sum of expected return and unexpected return, and that the unexpected return is broken down into a systematic (known) portion and an unsystematic (unknown) portion, then,

Total return = Expected return + unexpected (known) return + unexpected (unknown) return.

It is argued that the new uncertainty faced through the expansive strategy can also be broken down into known uncertainties and unknown uncertainties. With the unknown uncertainties being uncontrollable as they might relate to unpredictable events, such as uncontrollable social unrest, war related movements, volatile political environment [14], our objective focuses on the reduction of the known uncertainties.

4.2 New risks associated with the external environment

4.2.1 Risks associated with the University / CE division administrative arrangement

New inherent risks may arise from the expansive university strategy due to the external environment the CE unit is now engaged in. Put in a larger cultural context, different organizations tend to operate in different corporate cultures, or what Fairfield-Sonn [7] calls "artifacts, history, ideology and values" or, in the words of Hofstede [11], "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another". Different cultural organizations, when exposed to each others, such as the case of an alliance, may bring themselves together or pull apart from each other.

A university tends to normally operate inside the university walls driven by its academic priorities. It does so by abiding to its own style of operations (example extends from needed approval by academics, to yearly budget cycles, administrative rules and regulations...). Hence, from a university's perspective, a university style is generally more suited for a predictable / bureaucratic environment.

In contrast, a local high school or a local NGO tends to operate with a different culture than a university, and it would tend to have its own sets of objectives. Weather you offer Eller and Eller's [11] perspective, where "school culture is a result of the combined climate issues that have been in place and reinforced over an extended period of time" or follow

Sergiovanni's [16] who argues that "culture is generally thought of as the normative glue that holds a particular school together", then the concept of culture refers to the deeper, more foundational aspects of the school's operation. A school is normally a smaller operation, and it abides by its own "administrative rules and regulations, group norms, espoused values, formal philosophy, habits of thinking and integrated symbols" [6]. It has a unique set of followers (families, students, teachers, parental communities) and normally carries a school agenda. By comparison, an NGO partner may be inspired by a political motivation, may tend to be more entrepreneurial, and may be more community / socially driven.

Through the partnership arrangement, CE units operating in the outreach environment aim at:

1. Responding quickly on the ground to new client requests through the offering of existing or new programs
2. Having a speedy access to a broad and responsive faculty base
3. Being more sensitive to local cultures and local habits
4. Factoring, to the possible extent, the politically and socially unstable environment.

As a consequence, it becomes essential from the university to:

1. Commit more for the service oriented CE unit and encourage faculty of the different schools to participate
2. Provide extra flexibility and act more as a facilitator, with less bureaucratic rules
3. Take into consideration the entrepreneurial CE drive and provide direct responses for emerging CE needs
4. Give more autonomy for the CE unit as an organic structure within the university, with supplemental say in CE matters
5. Create more capacity in terms of physical, financial and staff, ...

How does the university acclimatize itself with the newly acquired CE strategic alliance when the university's main focus aims at strictly academic matters for an academically driven strategic plan? How much, where and when does the CE unit adhere to strict university rules and regulations when its newly acquired concerns are characterized with entrepreneurialism, flexibility, and scholarship funding for the underprivileged? Such are the new challenges. If we postulate that organizational needs are to support business strategies and we recognize with Heller [10], and that "there is a special relationship between an organization's culture and its performance", then the CE unit new aim is to find the right balance between centralized [9,17,18] university issues (such as better communication channels through direct CE participation in university matters, advocating close cooperation with the university administrative bodies, financial economies of scale, programmatic uniformity,...) and autonomous [3,12] CE issues (such having more CE say in CE matters such as financial and resource management, curriculum, staff and external relations). On one hand, this would enhance the ability of the CE unit to properly channel the available university assets and resources without jeopardizing university concerns. On the other, it would allow the CE unit to better respond to the growing needs of the outreach communities it is serving.

4.2.2 Risk and the choice of a strategic ally for best serving the communities

Perhaps the risk associated with the selection of a strategic ally to serve the communities is best exemplified through the potentially negative synergy or spillover effect that the strategic alliance might otherwise produce. This is illustrated through a series of questions.

1. Does the synergy in the alliance create a branding conflict between the university, the school and the NGO? As the new brand of the strategic alliance starts to spread regionally through local media and local advertising, does the newly created brand translate into conflict, or perhaps, does it set into a course of collision with the already established brand of the local

high school or the local NGO partner? This question is especially true when the smaller party in the alliance feels overshadowed, dominated or threatened as the alliance is perceived as potentially diluting the original local brand.

2. Does the synergistic alliance limit the ability to reach out for specific communities? For example, could the CE alliance offer professional law programs through a high school environment? Likewise, could invited doctors, nurses and related staff to a high school setting learn more about health related continuing education programs?

The choice of a strategic ally should also take into consideration the targeted communities. We then argue that selecting strategic partners by aligning the product / alliance / customer mix is the best strategic choice. This would result in reducing the related uncertainties to strategic offerings and would reach out for more communities. In the example above, a CE center residing in a local high school delivers programs in education, arts and science. A CE / Local Chamber of Commerce alliance delivers programs in business, management and law. As a consequence, branding related issues are sensibly resolved.

4.2.3 Uncertainty and strategic knowledge management

Strategic knowledge management is a critical component within the context of the CE external environment and the CE strategic alliance. According to Earl [5], strategic knowledge management is a dimension of a competitive strategy, whether its perspective is information-based, technology-based or culture-based. This distinction becomes crucial if that particular perspective of knowledge is missing. A CE strategic knowledge management strategy aims at facilitating the strategic marketing planning, controlling risk management and providing added valued service.

From a client perspective, it provides the client with various aspects of creatively mix-and-matching many offered CE programs for the purpose of selectively tailoring the CE program of choice. For the CE unit, an Information technology (IT) based strategic knowledge management provides informational leverage, operational efficiencies and management flexibilities that outweigh the benefits to the cost [2]. Integration facilitates the ability to find information quicker and easier as files become centralized and not scattered in different places. Further, the use of an integrated technology information system is an excellent tool for interactive marketing planning and for enhanced customer service (examples would be on-line registration, on line access, on line catalog, on line admission, ..)

As the system transcends physical and organizational boundaries it then offers up-to-date, accurate and relevant information, both to the various CE units in the regions and to central CE. In addition, such a system allows for better shared information with the strategic partners, thus enhancing the level of cooperation. The fast response through which the IT based system is then appreciated by all concerned stakeholders. Last but not least, a new CRM based module can enhance existing client interactions.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In all, we have argued that a spirited CE strategy, driven by the principled notion of service to the community, is more of a successful strategy when it is associated with the university's abilities to respond to new threats and opportunities due to the external environment it now faces.

Despite proper strategic planning, the implementation phase of any strategic plan may call for adaptations of the existing plan, especially when feedback from the ground up is to be considered. Educational institutions are no exception and the key is rapid response. This reflects alertness, practical concerns and business acumen.

It has been argued that organizational strategy needs to support business strategy. We advocate a close collaboration with the university's administration to properly find an

administrative arrangement that best serves CE objectives. In the search for more CE input in CE matters, the delicate balanced approach between university priorities and CE priorities is predicated.

To focus on streamlining the strategic alliance to best serve the interest of the targeted communities creates positive synergies. Smart but selective diversification in the regional alliance may get to serve the maximum number of communities in the best possible way.

Ensuring that IT support system provides full integration in the process of best serving the client needs is key. Stakeholders benefit and associated risks are reduced. Benefits extend from enhanced CE support functions, to enabling creative client services, in addition to offering a strategic, interactive marketing planning tool.

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