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Bridging Minds and Markets at AUB: Innovation and Research for a Sustainable Lebanon

The Research, Innovation, and Creativity Hub (RICH) within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the American University of Beirut (AUB), organized its first *"Bridging Minds and Markets"* forum, to explore how academia can actively support Lebanon's industrial growth through innovation, research, and workforce development.

Participants from AUB, from government, and from some of the country's leading industries discussed how universities could serve as reliable partners in creating homegrown solutions, transferring technology, and supporting local advancements.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Fadlo Khuri, AUB president, noted that, while distance remains between academia and industry, "This conference is our call to move beyond scattered initiatives and toward more systemic changes and a formal infrastructure for collaboration and acceleration."

He also emphasized the importance of collaboration between the state, industry, and universities: "The triple helix model of public, private, and academic has proven highly effective elsewhere. Lebanon must shape its own version, grounded in our context, but driven by shared ambition and a conviction that this will become a sustainable country that is fairer and more inclusive for all."

Remarking on Lebanon's long history of losing its most brilliant minds, Khuri said of young people today, "While many are preparing to leave, questioning their role in Lebanon's future, if we can show them that education leads to employment, opportunity, and even leadership...more and more will choose to stay." This point was picked up on by other speakers as well, who proposed close cooperation with the diaspora, which is ready to invest money and put its innovative know-how, contacts, and networks at the service of the country.

The speakers agreed that during Lebanon's five-year socioeconomic crisis, industry was among the few, if not the only, sectors that avoided layoffs. Key sectors like agri-food, pharmaceutical, packaging production, and jewelry could benefit from collaboration with academia. Experts also highlighted biotech and artificial intelligence as emerging priorities.

The discussion emphasized that most Lebanese industrial companies are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that need protection and support. Participants noted that despite the

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companies' size, when it comes to industry, Lebanon should cater not only to its four million inhabitants but also to the entire Middle East, comprising at least half a billion consumers.

Participants pointed out that the state also has an important role to play in encouraging industry, which has not been the case since the 1990s; highlighting that taxes and production costs remain very high, particularly with regard to electricity bills, waste management, and land acquisition.

Speakers noted that since there is no industry without innovation, research is crucial, and it is in this context that academia could contribute. They stressed the importance of collaboration, and that the needs of local industries should be taken into consideration to develop a university curriculum that matches these needs and to create incubators on campuses. References were made to global examples such as Silicon Valley.

One of the panelists speaking to this point was Dr. Carol Abi Karam, general manager of Pharmaline, who said, "We are working in an innovation and research-driven sector, so we need to nurture and continuously improve our portfolio with innovative and advanced therapies. Here, we need the support—but the practical support—of universities in applied research projects, alongside publications. Publications are as important to the pharma industry as they are to universities," she said.

In another panel discussion, Minister of Industry Joe Issa el-Khoury said, "To successfully transform research into commercially viable industrial solutions, three pillars must work together: ideas, people, and funding. Ideas emerge from local and international industries, startups, and individuals. Universities—starting from the early education system—play a critical role in preparing skilled talent to meet these industry needs. When strong academic ecosystems and innovative industries align, funding naturally follows."

The event featured additional speakers such as Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) Dean Fares Dahdah; FAS Associate Dean Wissam Raji; Fady Abboud, CEO of General Packaging Industries; Walid Assaf, Chairman of SMLC; Michel Daher, CEO of Daher Food; Neemat Frem, CEO of Indevco; Fady Gemayel, Honorary Chairman of Gemeyal Freres SAL; Nada Sabra, UNIDO Liaison; Ziad Shammass, Head of the Executive Board of IRALEB; and Salim Zeeni, President of the Association of Lebanese Industrialists. The panels were moderated by Professors Houssam Rassi, Rabih Talhouk, and Tania Haddad.

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 790 full-time faculty members and a student body of over 9000 students. AUB currently offers more than

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140 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 365-bed hospital.

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