



LeMSIC

Lebanese Medical Students'
International Committee

اللجنة الدولية لطببة الطب في لبنان

LeMSIC Policy Document

Student Mobility

Proposed by: the National Exchange Officers and the Vice-President for External Affairs 2020-21

Adopted by the Team of Officials in August 2021

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Policy Statement

Introduction:

Medical School is not restricted to pure theoretical courses taken in a regular classroom, deeming professional experience a necessity for every Lebanese medical student. Several activities can be done to fill the gap on the national level, but being in the twenty-first century, international activities have become a must, since they grant every medical student a very important experience, in addition to knowledge. Many parties are seeking to help medical students gain this experience, starting with universities and not ending with national and international health organizations: they offer students internship opportunities, accomodation, financial aid and more. But nowadays, the fact of being Lebanese will exhaust anyone trying to dive into new opportunities and projects, with a thousand hindrances and limitations, making their distribution non-equitable and increasing the burden on everyone who will seize the opportunity.

This policy is a tool that will allow us to portray the definition of student mobility, its importance to medical students, and the urgent need to address the unequal and unfair access to mobility opportunities.

LeMSIC Position:

The Lebanese Medical Students' International Committee (LeMSIC) strongly believes that medical students have the right to equal academic, professional and educational student mobility opportunities regardless of subjective, geographical, political, financial, sexual, cultural or religious backgrounds.

Such experiences are highly educational for students and many times provide a professional advantage to those who are involved, however, for students in Lebanon there is frequently unequal access to such opportunities both on the national level and with international organizations. For that end, LeMSIC stands firmly in its fight for a fair and equitable availability of student mobility experiences.

Calls to Action:

LeMSIC calls for **Government** to:

1. Provide official recognition of the LeMSIC National Exchange Programs.
2. Facilitate visa procedures for foreigners (Incomings) as a way to make bilateral student mobility easier.
3. Assign a specific budget to support students participating in mobility programs.
4. Provide access to public facilities and their utilities, and increase their capacities in mobility programs.
5. Provide vaccination for students participating in mobility programs and facilitate the procedure to get a certified proof of vaccination from the government.





LeMSIC calls for Medical schools to:

1. Build partnerships with Organizations such as IFMSA and its corresponding NMOs as well as other student run NGOs in the country that encourage Student Mobility programs.
2. Offer the organization support by providing materials, tutors, and even financial help whenever needed.
3. Provide monetary support to expand the availability and the success of the programs.
4. Ease the process of students' acceptance by providing records such as invitation letters, recommendation letters, and backing letters for the program and the government offices.
5. Promote the exchange program locally by having yearly seminars explaining the process and the importance of attending such a program.
6. Implement a pre-departure training for students including but not limited to topics such as global health, interculturalism, and ethical morals.
7. Send a pre and post evaluation to students to improve the upcoming programs.
8. Offer students chances to present what they have worked on throughout the exchange and support any published work.
9. Promote the academic recognition of exchanges as credits in the medical curriculum of all concerned universities.

LeMSIC calls for National Health Organizations and Medical Associations to:

1. Offer foreign students opportunities for education and work.
2. Help in programs such as professional and research exchanges by providing financial support, contacts and recommendations.
3. Standardize and help in the recognition of exchange programs.
4. Find ways (like the standardization of the medical curriculum) for medical students to be able to study a certain academic year or semester in another local or foreign institution or to be able to change their medical school before they finish their medical degree.

LeMSIC calls for Embassies to:

1. Facilitate the visa process for students going on an IFMSA medical exchange program such as ensuring an expeditious issuance of the visa.
2. Avoid rejecting visas to students going on an IFMSA medical exchange program unless there is a solid reason not to.
3. In times of uncertainties - such as during a pandemic - reconsider the students' applications as all safety measures are already guaranteed by the hosting National Member Organization.
4. Support the IFMSA medical exchange program by offering free visa applications - or a discount - to the students





LeMSIC calls for Medical Students to:

1. Participate in sessions and conferences aiming to introduce students to different available exchange opportunities.
2. Demand to be part of different decision-making processes related to Student Mobility in their respective institutions.
3. Engage in exchange programs to enrich their medical and cultural knowledge.
4. Encourage their peers to take part in exchange programs.
5. Report back any challenge to their institutions and actively take part in enhancing the exchanges by suggesting and implementing solutions.
6. Identify stakeholders (medical schools, ministry of education, ministry of external affairs, IFMSA...) and persistently demand for Student Mobility opportunities.



Position Paper

Background:

Student mobility, defined as any opportunity for students to study or work abroad whilst undertaking their degree program, [1] is not restricted to the medical field. It has been demonstrated that this intercultural phenomenon is included across all fields, and has become a characteristic of higher education policy. Furthermore, as individuals' mobility increases – by travel, migration, and other means – doctors' need for intercultural skills in their home country grows. [2]

As any clinical experience will offer them a variety of benefits including personal and professional competencies, communication, interpersonal and intercultural skills, and active citizenship, etc. [3]

Discussion:

The importance of student mobility

Student Mobility is now one of the pillars of medical education for students. In fact, medical exchanges are an integral part of the studies of medical students and it has been shown that more than 70% of them completed at least one stay abroad. [2]

They are in fact, a primordial way for the students to prepare to face their future life as physicians in all aspects. It will enhance their intercultural communication and interaction skills and will shape them into becoming doctors capable of working in a global environment with different races, cultures as well as population. Exchange students will have the ability to know the way medicine is practiced in a different country and will prepare them for the challenges medical doctors face in a multicultural society. [4] [5] [10] [12]

The exposure of the students to different cultures and mentalities will enable them to interact with students and physicians with other languages and values. This will encourage them to be more self-reliable and flexible and will force them to adapt to any situation or context they are placed in. It will also enable the exchange students to understand the healthcare system of the host country, how it is organized and how it operates and to compare it to the country of origin. [4] [5] [6] [13]

Moreover, medical exchanges will promote the internationalization of the curriculum in Medical Education as well as the reinforcement of the values of globalization in health in general. It is an extra proof that the medical values as well as the doctor-patient relationship is universal and knows no borders. [2]

Participating in a medical exchange will allow students to be exposed to patients with diseases not commonly encountered in their country of origin and which are studied theoretically but never encountered in practice. This exposure will distinguish them from regular students and add a clinical perspective to the diseases studied in the books. [7]

Furthermore, mobility of students will help them decide on their personal choice of specialty as well as employment decisions later in their careers. In fact, it will allow them to have a positional advantage in the local and international labor market. [8] [9] [11]



Finally, student mobility in the medical specialty provides its participants with various research opportunities pertaining to different topics and fields which arms students with critical thinking and scientific writing as well as international and intercultural team work. [3]

LeMSIC's Exchanges

The Lebanese Medical Students' International Committee (LeMSIC) has been taking part in the largest student-run medical exchange program worldwide since 1997. Each year, it allows more than 100 medical students from 6 different Local Committees, namely American University of Beirut, Beirut Arab University, Lebanese American University, Lebanese University, University of Balamand and Université Saint Joseph, to embark on a one-month journey to immerse into a different culture while discovering and exploring the specificities of a new healthcare system. This is made possible by signing, every year, new contracts with other National Member Organizations (NMOs), most of which are located in Europe. Czech Republic, Spain and Germany are usually among the most preferred ones. In August 2020, new contracts were signed with Brazil, Morocco and India, broadening the horizons. In the future, there is a will to reach out to further destinations, such as South America or South-East Asia. Similarly, LeMSIC has been hosting incoming students from different parts of the world, providing them with a high quality clinical and research experience in our most prestigious hospitals, i.e. American University of Beirut Medical Center, Makassed Hospital, Rizk Hospital, Hôpital Libanais Geitaoui, Saint Georges Hospital, Mount Lebanon Hospital and Hôtel Dieu de France. During their stay, LeMSIC also makes sure to acquaint the students with the beauty and fun of all of this while achieving an impressive academic quality.

This way, LeMSIC stands to offer its future healthcare workers an opportunity to step out of their comfort zone through promoting intercultural learning, research and cooperation. [14] [15]

Other than the exchanges between the different National Member Organizations, LeMSIC worked in the 2020-2021 term to provide more opportunities to its members. LeMSIC signed an MoU with Phronesis Advisory to allow members to have a clinical observership experience in the United States. In addition, SCOPE, with other standing committees, implemented 2 national activities aiming to enrich the knowledge of LeMSIC members and allow them to gain more experience in their own country and be more familiar with the Lebanese Healthcare System.

The 2 activities are:

- Med-Ex: this medical exchange activity allows students to have a clinical observership similar to the IFMSA Professional Exchange but in Lebanon. Collaboration and contracts have been signed with several university and non-university hospitals all over Lebanon to give equitable chances to students wherever they live. This national exchange will consist of one month of observation in a certain department in a hospital at the end of which the student will obtain a certificate.





- Pure Heart Foundation: LeMSIC collaborated with the Pure Heart Foundation on their mission to perform pediatric heart surgeries in Rachaya Governmental Hospital. Members from LeMSIC participated in the mission and shadowed international cardiologists and cardiothoracic surgeons in surgeries, interventions and diagnostic tests. [15]

Obstacles to student mobility

Multiple factors hinder Lebanese medical student's choice to mobilize. These factors include but are not limited to the following.

Financial burdens, the most important obstacle faced by students [16] which has been made worse in the setting of strict capital control mechanisms and the increase in the exchange rate. As of 2020, Lebanon is ranked as having the fourth highest inflation rate globally at 85.45% [17]. This situation has been further exacerbated with the onset of the global pandemic and the lockdown and prevention measures the government has taken as an attempt to control the pandemic. While it is unclear if there is a clear strategy set by the government and Lebanon's Central Bank, the combined crises have magnified the impact of both and it has a critical impact on the purchasing power of the students. Thus, in such settings, for many students, involvement in exchange programs and opportunities is not a priority as there are more necessary and urgent purchases.

Unfortunately, these exchanges are not academically recognized by the administrative office of most schools of medicine in Lebanon. Even though most medical programs in Lebanon include elective courses, the professional exchange set by LeMSIC does not count into the total academic credit which demotivates members. Add to it that for most members, their academic year is packed with medical rotations and research studies. Thus, leaving no time for other extracurricular activities. Finding the right time to physically and mentally take on this experience can be hectic to most members especially when it comes to the struggle one has to endure to explain to the faculty the reason behind their leave of absence.

Another problem is the lack of orientation provided by medical schools [16] [18]. This lessens the students' knowledge of available options and different processes. And can also render students unsure of the benefit of this study abroad period and fear delaying their studies and losing time. [18] [19]

Visa restrictions for Lebanese citizens is also an important factor that prevents student motility. Visas might be rejected for different reasons: lack of information provided from the applicant, applicant does not qualify for the visa to which they applied.. Etc. According to the Passport Index, Lebanon currently ranks 72 out of 82 globally [20]. This ranking might be affected with the economic crises that we discussed previously and would further exacerbate the ranking and the visa requirements.

Lebanon has secured around 6 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine [21]. The arrival of these vaccines to Lebanon has brought hope to medical students. Universities as well as international governments are requesting a certified proof that students have been vaccinated against covid 19. Failure to provide such a document would affect students' mobility. So far, only 4.6% of Lebanon's population has been vaccinated [22].





The failure to organize such an essential procedure is hindering student's opportunity to participate in the professional exchange.

The hurdle of enduring the economic crises, obtaining the visa requirements and managing one's time is too much of a burden on LeMSIC's members.

Recognition of student mobility

With all aforementioned benefits of student mobility, LeMSIC acknowledges that medical students should be engaged in mobility experiences at least once during their education. And with academic non-recognition further being an obstacle to claiming this opportunity, LeMSIC strongly supports medical students and aims to make their mobility possible.

As a matter of fact, LeMSIC is a national member organization (NMO) in IFMSA and is aligned with its mission and vision. LeMSIC actually seeks to improve current exchanges' recognition through a thorough process of quality that includes: recruitment of tutors, selection and distribution of the exchange contracts, pre-departure and upon-arrival training, educational activities, scientific outcomes, assessment of quality and impact, and many more. It also works on endorsement from national and international agencies, among which Pure Heart foundation and Phronesis Advisory. [15]

Thus, IFMSA achieved promising results: SCORE Exchanges are now fully recognized as elective programs granted with academic credentials in medical schools from 28 National Member Organizations, and partially recognized in 25 National Member Organizations, while SCOPE Exchanges are fully recognized as elective programs and granted with academic credentials in medical schools from 43 National Member Organizations and partially recognized in 53 National Member Organizations. [15]

As per LeMSIC's situation, the first step towards a full recognition of the exchanges has been launched, with the Lebanese University being in the process of recognizing LeMSIC's international exchanges, thus supporting student mobility.



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