Teaching Public Policy for the Arab World

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IDRC Final Technical Report

February 11, 2016

Beirut, Lebanon

IDRC Project Number: 102831

IDRC Project Title:
Teaching Public Policy for the Arab World

Country/Region:
Lebanon, India, Iran, France, Switzerland

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Abstract

Alongside the support of a generous grant provided by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the American University of Beirut (AUB) was able to successfully establish and launch a new graduate program in Public Policy and International Affairs (PPIA), after its formal approval by the New York State Board and Lebanese Ministry of Education in 2014. The program, conceived as the academic side of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), builds on AUB’s distinguished reputation as the preeminent liberal arts institution in the region, while also building on the research and policy experience of IFI. The first cohort of students began their Masters program in PPIA during the Fall 2015 semester.

The IDRC Project Leader, Dr. Karim Makdisi, chaired the steering committee that produced the final proposal to establish the PPIA Program and then served as its first Director. During this 2-3 year process, he attended many consultation meetings with, and presented proposal updates to, key academic units, relevant faculty members, and various layers of committees within the AUB faculties, Board of Graduate Studies, University Senate and Board of Trustees. Supported by the IDRC grant, Dr. Makdisi visited key universities in Europe, Asia and the Arab world that offer similar graduate programs; and met with professors and administrators from relevant departments and schools, to hear firsthand their experience in the conception and foundation of such graduate programs. The idea behind these trips was to strengthen the PPIA proposal and think through potential partnerships and opportunities for students and faculty alike; and to seek the perspectives and learn lessons from regional and international institutions and individuals. In October 2015, during the very first semester of the PPIA program, Dr. Makdisi and Ms. Rima Rassi, PPIA Program Manager, hosted scholars and practitioners to a full day informal brainstorming seminar to discuss the proposed MA program curriculum, design and rationale; as well as reflect on the specific role of such a program in the Arab world, in particular following the uprisings and the ensuing shifting regional dynamics. This seminar, hosted at AUB-IFI, gathered around twenty local, regional and international scholars, as well as many AUB professors involved in this endeavor.

Indeed, the PPIA program fills an important need in the region. Through integrating politics, policy, economics and other social science research perspectives, this program offers students the opportunity to deepen their conceptual, critical, and practical knowledge of public policy and international affairs, with a focus on the challenges facing the Arab region.

Keywords

Public Policy, International Affairs, Education, Graduate Masters program, Interdisciplinary, Lebanon, IFI, American University of Beirut, Arab world
I. Program Demand

Over the past few years, there has been a clear and growing demand in the Arab region for professionals, researchers, and academics with deeper knowledge and advanced skills in public and international policy and affairs. There is an already long-standing established tradition of such academic programs in the US and Europe (Fletcher School, SIPA at Columbia University, Harvard’s Kennedy School, Science Po, Graduate Institute in Geneva…). However, many if not most of these programs are in fact “schools” and of a much larger nature in terms of resources, faculty, budget and staff. Indeed, such programs that encourage internationally relevant research and methods in local contexts are now proliferating more globally.

Reflecting this trend, the Arab region now has a growing number of universities that offer comparable programs, mostly focusing on international affairs rather than on public policy. These include Birzeit University’s Ibrahim Abu-Lughod’s Institute of International Studies (Palestine), Al-Akhawayn University’s MA program in International Studies and Diplomacy (Morocco, in cooperation with the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs); the American University in Cairo’s School of Global Affairs and Public Policy; and, Zayed University’s MA degree in Diplomacy and International Affairs (UAE). In Lebanon, the Lebanese American University (LAU) also offers a Masters program in International Affairs.

To more concretely gauge the perceived demand for such a program at the American University of Beirut (AUB), a market study on the interest of AUB students in the creation of a graduate program in Public Policy and International Affairs (PPIA) was conducted during the proposal writing stage. The results of the market study showed that students have considerable interest in pursuing this particular degree. Slightly more than half of the respondents thought that such a degree would open doors for better job opportunities in international organizations/think tanks. Almost two-thirds said this degree would provide better opportunities with research centers, along with opportunities to become policy advisors. The response was largely very positive indeed.

Given this growth in the demand for such a program, which increased considerably in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, AUB proposed the establishment of the graduate program in PPIA. It was envisaged that the PPIA program would situate itself within this particular domain but also distinguish itself mainly through its distinct understanding of the concept of public policy and international affairs; and its focus on moving away from imported theories and methods so as to allow for independent, critical and rigorous knowledge-production that is more context-specific within and about the Arab region.

II. The Research Problem

Through the successful design, implementation and introduction of the PPIA program, two central problems were addressed: 1) the general lack of understanding of the policy process in the Arab region and how the shifting international/global context influences this process; and 2) the weak link between
research, knowledge production, and policy in (and for) the region. Since very few academic programs currently exist in the Arab region to address these problems, the dynamic academic nature of the PPIA program fills an important need in the region. Through integrating politics, policy, economics and other social science research perspectives, this program offers students the opportunity to deepen their conceptual, critical, and practical knowledge of public policy and international affairs, with a focus on the challenges facing the Arab region.

As such, and alongside the support of a generous grant provided by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), AUB was able to successfully establish and launch a new graduate program in Public Policy and International Affairs (PPIA) after its formal approval by the New York State Board and Lebanese Ministry of Education in 2014. The program, conceived as the academic side of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), builds on AUB’s distinguished reputation as the pre-eminent liberal arts institution in the region, while also building on the research and policy experience of IFI. The PPIA curriculum is based on students successfully completing 42-credits: a minimum of 36 credits of graduate course work + 6 credits of either (i) interdisciplinary thesis work or (ii) internship and final year project in a non-thesis track. In addition, a zero-credit intensive Economics refresher would be required for those students without a basic economics background. All in all, this program was designed to be more intensive than the usual 30-credit graduate program at AUB.

Over the many years since the program’s conception, proposal, establishment and implementation, the understanding of the raison d’etre program has not changed, but rather, evolved to a wider comprehension of what this program should entail for both students and the greater domain of public affairs in the Arab world. The PPIA program recognizes Public Policy to include both the array of actors/interests involved in the policy process, and the structures within which such policy processes are conducted. Public policy thus considers policies elaborated in the public sphere by public and non-state actors, operating on the global, international, national and local levels. On the other hand, the PPIA program understands International Affairs to include an array of related disciplines and disciplinary approaches (political science, sociology, anthropology, economics, history…) and to strengthen the interconnections, facilitate the interdisciplinary dialogue and further institutionalize the increasingly overlapping and interdisciplinary character of international issues and affairs. International affairs thus consider policy-related problems in contemporary interconnected world from a multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives and traditions, addressing the global trend and the local needs for more inclusive and pluralist arsenal of theories and methodologies. Such understandings contribute to the interdisciplinary character of the PPIA program.

It should be noted that the PPIA steering committee that led the process at the time fully appreciated that the proposed PPIA program was rather ambitious. At the same time, given the strong support from the AUB administration and the positive feedback from faculty and colleagues inside and outside AUB, it was widely understood that regardless of the time and effort required to get this program running, the PPIA program would be valuable, original and much needed.
in the region. In essence, the steering committee members set themselves and the program a high standard to create a program that challenges contemporary understandings of international affairs and public policy, and that is centered on the Arab region.

III. Project Objectives

The initial proposal to the IDRC outlined one concrete project objective: to support the development of a Masters level program in Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB. This program would build on a growing local, regional and international demand to study the Arab world and seek to study and critique the policy agenda in the region and beyond through articulating policy problems and positions that are based on properly understood contexts and specificities. The overarching purpose of the program was to build capacity in the domains of public policy and international affairs, while linking this capacity building with research, education and knowledge production in these fields.

With the PPIA program’s welcoming of its first batch of ten graduate students during the Fall 2015-2016 semester, the IDRC project has been successfully completed and its objective met. The IDRC’s support has lead to a more thoughtful and viable MA program and fruitfully helped build the PPIA program’s solid network of institutions, scholars and practitioners.

IV. Project Methodology

To further strengthen the PPIA’s mission, and to seek perspectives and learn lessons from regional and international institutions and individuals, this IDRC project facilitated the project leader’s visit to key universities and centers that offer similar and/or complimentary graduate programs. At the time of IDRC proposal submission, the IFI team had researched and initiated contact with interested universities in the U.S, Canada, the European Union, Turkey, Singapore, India, South Africa, and the Arab region. The PPIA steering committee was particularly interested in liaising with other universities in the Global South as much as practically possible to enhance South-South cooperation: this was considered a prime opportunity to develop further AUB’s comparative advantage. Therefore, an important aspect of this project’s methodology was to collaborate with faculty directors and heads of public policy/international affairs programs to share lessons learnt and best practices, as well as build networks, collaboration and potentially exchange programs. Major outcomes of such visits suggested and included: assessing various program’s balance curriculum load (including core courses versus electives, the degree of flexibility students have in choosing courses, and need for specialization/concentration tracks); learning lessons regarding how the program structures its relationship with core departments from which it draws affiliated faculty; assessing roles played by partnerships with other institutions (nationally and internationally) and internship programs; exploring optimal relationship between research and teaching components within the programs; and working to create or strengthen collaboration and/or partnerships.
To complement this data collection and networking phase, the project leader also proposed to invite a small group of scholars and practitioners to a round-table seminar at AUB to, a) provide ideas feedback on the proposed MA program, rationale and curriculum; and b) substantively analyze the role such programs/institutions play in furthering the understanding of policy and international affairs, with a particular focus on the Arab region in today's transition.

V. Project Activities

The Successful Establishment of the PPIA Program

The original PPIA proposal took over two years to prepare, following a comprehensive review of the literature and existing similar programs in the Arab region and globally and extensive meetings with several high-ranking members of AUB administration, AUB faculty and other external experts. The PPIA proposal developed by the faculty steering committee evolved considerably during 2013-2014 as it went through rigorous AUB internal and then external review. After further assessment, the AUB Board of Trustees approved the PPIA proposal on March 21, 2014. Following further external review, the New York State Education Department officially registered the PPIA program in a letter dated October 20, 2014.

Project Leader Visits to Other Schools/Programs

To further support the PPIA program and to seek perspectives and learn lessons from other institutions and individuals who have established or worked with similar programs, Dr. Makdisi, alongside the newly appointed PPIA Program Manager, Ms. Rima Rassi, identified key universities and centers that offer complimentary graduate programs. Dr. Makdisi and Ms. Rassi reinitiated contact with interested universities in Europe and in Asia, as one of the central aims of the program was to liaise with other universities in the Global South as much as possible, as a manner to enhance South-South cooperation. The meeting of and collaboration with individuals from similar public policy/international affairs graduate programs in Europe and Asia proved to be very beneficial. Dr. Makdisi traveled to India, France, Switzerland, and Iran and during each of his visits, he met with faculty members, directors, senior administration, heads and students of similar public policy/international affairs graduate programs. He found each of his visits to be a sound step forward in the building of solid institutional networks and arenas for collaboration. A number of the institutions have already suggested the creation of potential exchange programs on the graduate level. Dr. Makdisi also met with a number of directors and heads of important universities on many of his personal trips, such as the Director of the Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Institute of International Studies in Birzeit University and Deans and professors from Al Akhawayn University in Morocco. While Dr. Makdisi was also hoping to travel to visit universities in Turkey, Cairo and Morocco, due to busy schedules on all ends, and some of the deans and professors going on academic leave, it was proved rather
difficult to schedule travel and meeting dates that suited both parties. Dr. Makdisi is still in constant contact with his colleagues in similar programs in universities all around the world, and will be hopefully be pursuing opportunities for research and exchange with many of these institutions in the near future.

*Seminar/Brainstorming Meeting*

As specified in the project methodology, and before the end of the first semester of the PPia program, Dr. Makdisi and Ms. Rassi convened an informal brainstorming meeting to think through what it means to teach public and international policy in, and from, the Arab region today. The aim of this brainstorming meeting was to generate discussion on many issues and responding to many questions, including:

- What is the best way for this program to shape the mindset of, and collaborate with, graduating students intent on working in—or analyzing—the Arab public sphere?
- Who/what is or should be the program’s main audience and constituents?
- What analytical and professional skills do those seeking to understand and address policy problems in the region really need?
- How can the program help sustained interest in studying the particular politics and policy-making processes in the Arab world without lapsing into parochial claims and approaches?

The main objective of this brainstorming meeting was to tap into the experience and knowledge of a small group of scholars, practitioners and directors of similar programs in Lebanon, the region, and internationally to help answer some of these questions and thus support the PPia program’s intellectual and professional goals. In short, this seminar was envisaged so as to concretize the ways in which AUB should maintain the kind of dynamism, energy and intellectual vision, rooted in the region’s needs and problems that led us to create the program in the first place. The brainstorming meeting was hosted at IFI-AUB on Friday, November 6, 2015. The formal of this meeting was semi-structured, to allow as dynamic a conversation as possible. Prior to the seminar, Dr. Makdisi and Ms. Rassi asked all participants to focus on four main issues before attending the seminar, which included:

a) Tackling the questions of how to go about thinking, conceptualizing and critiquing policy issues outside the Western policy framework, and assess how to bridge the gap between those who “think” and those who “decide”;

b) Reflecting on how to increase academic interaction and knowledge production on public and international policymaking within a South-South context, a dimension largely deficient in the Arab region;

c) Discussing how to target and pursue our audience in the Arab world, deliberating on the kind and type of audience such graduate programs should attract; and

d) Analyzing the role of such programs and institutions in fostering the understanding of policy and international affairs in the greater Arab region.
Attendees of this brainstorming seminar included a variety of local, regional and international scholars and experts. Based on feedback by the participants and organizers, the brainstorming seminar proved to be a success, with all of the suggested questions tackled and discussed in-depth. A number of central recommendations for the program were provided to the PPIA program director and faculty. A final report will be soon be produced organized around the key questions the participants are asked to address—plus any others that came out of the discussion—synthesizing the insights gained and the recommendations put on the table for the PPIA program.

VI. Project Outputs

The primary, successful output of this overall project is the viable MA program at AUB that addresses the needs of the region in terms of policy and international affairs. Our expectation of this output is that the program will not only serve as a center of excellence in teaching, but also, as a center of critical thinking about available policy options within a dynamic international context. For the Fall 2015-2016 semester – the launch semester of the PPIA program – twenty student applications were received, of which ten students were accepted and joined the program. For the Spring 2015-2016 semester, PPIA received eleven applications – far more than the majority of graduate programs at AUB, considerably making it one of the most in-demand graduate programs in terms of applicants.

At the moment, in terms of capacity building, the PPIA program is working on strengthening and consolidating two important relationships. These two relationships will, in turn, lead to the program becoming an influential knowledge producer and consolidate AUB’s excellent profile and growing reputation in public and international policy fields and networks in the Middle East.

1. PPIA-IFI. The PPIA program is housed in the same building as IFI, creating an exceptional interactive, dynamic academic experience. The relationship between IFI and PPIA is based on both of their capacities to combine technical research of quality with equally rigorous and critical academic analysis of regional policy and political issues. Through this cooperative relationship, new and experimental research will be developed and catalyzed, through the interaction of current and new faculty members, graduate students, and organizations outside of AUB. In the courses offered, and with the people and organizations involved, existing theories can be critiqued and new ones based on regional and local specificities advanced. PPIA students are well informed of IFI’s research agenda and programs, and are well engaged and involved with all of IFI’s events and initiatives. As such, PPIA students are making use of the dozens of speakers that participate annually in IFI activities such as lectures, workshops and conferences. More importantly, these students are gaining exposure to the real world experiences of policymakers, academics, politicians, diplomats and other stakeholders. These interactions create a collaborative research environment – one that is unique of its kind – whereby PPIA students will acquire a crucial understanding of the practice of linking research to policy, and how to respond to the critical and contemporary policy issues, such as the changing geopolitical regional order, refugee movements, and
climate change negotiations.. Indeed, this is an added value that does not exist anywhere, in any of the other programs situated in the Arab region.

2. PPIA-CAMES. The relationship between PPIA and CAMES is cooperative and dynamic in nature. As CAMES offers a graduate program in Middle Eastern Studies, the objectives of the PPIA program and CAMES complement and enhance existing research, events and activities. The main and significant benefit to such a relationship is the intellectual environment created by CAMES and PPIA. Certainly, the interaction between PPIA and CAMES will offer highly qualified students from both departments the opportunity to further their education in a unique and exciting environment, while at the same time giving these students the chance to gain a broader and deeper interdisciplinary research experience of the Arab world than is possible from a single MA program offered by just any department. During the first semester, PPIA and CAMES have collaborated on more than five different lectures, talks and events that engaged PPIA and CAMES students, faculty, and staff, in addition to the larger AUB community.

With respect to research, a number of interesting project outputs are worth noting. First, a mapping of similar institutions and programs to PPIA in the Arab world, Asia, the US and Europe was conducted. This information will be rather useful for short-term and long-term program plans with regards to knowledge building and networking for the PPIA program. As previously mentioned, the report for the November 2015 brainstorming seminar will also be finalized and disseminated soon. Finally, the program seeks to write a report of the process to create an MA program, which may prove valuable for others attempting similar endeavors. This particular output will be assessed at the end of PPIA’s first academic year.

VII. Project Outcomes

The creation of this program has contributed greatly to educational innovation in the fields of public policy and international affairs in the Arab world. This program will influence policy through every generation of public affairs students who will successfully complete the program: indeed, graduates of PPIA will be thoroughly prepared to participate and analyze the policy processes in the Arab region; raise awareness about central public and international concerns; advance the accountability, capacity and responsiveness of public actors and political leaders; and, most significantly, promote rigorous public policies that are, as much as possible, informed by empirical evidence. Furthermore, this program has also created new relationships among different faculty members and departments around AUB. One of the core strengths of this program is that it builds upon the expertise and knowledge of AUB faculty members across departments, while also bringing together students from a variety of different backgrounds, disciplines, and nationalities.


VIII. Overall Assessment and Recommendations

It seems clear that PPIA has great potential to 'break down' the apparent duality between 'practice' and 'scholarship' (conceptual frameworks) in policy, and to bridge the gap between institutions of higher education in the Global South. Indeed, the high demand of the program only reiterates the importance and huge potential of this interdisciplinary endeavor in the Arab region. While this program is considerably more intensive (by AUB standards) than other graduate programs, it was agreed that this adopted curriculum involving 42 credits upon graduation would provide deep conceptual and critical knowledge of public policy and international affairs, as well as the necessary professional skills and networks to pursue potential careers in public affairs.

AUB indeed has a solid reputation for producing regional leaders and high-ranking public officials in the Arab world. Building on AUB’s distinguished track record as the prominent liberal arts institution in Lebanon and the region, the PPIA program, with its vast academic potential, seeks to ensure that the future generations of leaders are properly equipped with the tools required to have successful careers in these domains, ultimately impacting policy processes in Lebanon and the Arab world. It should be noted that with the new AUB administration as of Fall 2015, all interdisciplinary programs at the university have been under review, including PPIA.