

# A review of the dissertation thesis: **Teacher Education in Lebanon: A Comparison of Programs in American and French-Patterned Universities**

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Study Program: Education

Field of Study: Education

## **Topic, aim and structure of the thesis**

The dissertation thesis addresses an interesting and extremely important topic that corresponds to the field of study. The content of the thesis is linked with its title. The aim is presented differently in different parts of the text (for instance, in a narrower sense on p. 14 in contrast with p. 17). However, the text of the thesis leads to the fulfilment of the broader aim, as presented on p. 17.

The text is structured clearly and logically; nevertheless, some passages lack a direct relation to the main topic, for instance, the subchapter 2.5.4. Still, taken from a reader's perspective, these passages may be of interest as insights into the development and current context and issues in Lebanon, which are not frequently discussed subjects. The work is clearly divided into six main chapters, which are supplemented by the introduction, the conclusion, a rather extensive list of sources used (142 pages in total), and a list of acronyms and appendices A-L necessary for the empirical research. The text does not lack cohesion; arguments are, in most cases, well-supported. The text is written in fluent English, with only a few mistakes. The scope of work is standard, and it is well based on an abundance of resources.

## **Theoretical part and methodological design of the research**

The introduction of the thesis explains its structure, and, in particular, its overall meaning. This corresponds to the unusual context of the research appealing to a wide range of actors as well as academic disciplines. Most of the relevant aspects and specifics are elaborated on in the theoretical part. Sharing the author's concept of the key terms in the introduction (pp. 11-14), the text promotes the understanding of the main arguments of the theoretical part. However, it doesn't tackle the ability, readiness or even the willingness of the teacher to fulfil all the roles mentioned on page 11. In other words, it opens the question of the concepts of becoming vs being a teacher. How the author understands the relationship between „teacher education (p. 11), teacher professional development (p. 19), the teaching profession and professionalism (part 1.2, p. 21-22)” is unclarified. It would be highly recommended to refer to this during the defence (with the support of arguments presented on p. 128).

The first chapter provides the theoretical framework as the author guides the reader through relevant concepts. Diverse fundamental dilemmas of university education are hinted at, yet the unanswered question remains as to whether the author perceives this education as a "panacea" for teacher professionalism. Teachers' work in school life is essentially a collective, collegial one, yet the collaboration can be understood as a continuum ranging from professional collaboration to collaborative professionalism. Including this argument in presenting

the concept of teacher professionalism could provide insight into the challenges of university education. The broad topic chosen for the dissertation naturally resulted in coverage of only some relevant aspects of teacher education. However, teacher education is scarcely analysed from a life-long and life-wide perspective which could enrich the reflection of the potential as well as the limits of university studies as well. Freiman-Nemser's typology and Shulman's theory, accompanied by Kortagen's theory, were chosen as a framework for further analyses. Adding the dimension of technology helps to evaluate positively the originality of the proposed criteria for program evaluation. Still, it would be relevant to clarify (at least in the theoretical part) whether the programmes reflect students' educational needs and, in contrast, their learning outcomes. Furthermore, what is the status quo of students' evaluation of university programmes during their studies? What also appears to be missing is a psychological perspective that would indicate, for example, the concept of a teacher's identity or different prerequisites for one's own professional development (that includes making a commitment to become a teacher, accepting a professional commitment). This would also be helpful when providing a broader frame of the perceived effectiveness. In particular, this could be highly interesting, especially when the research is based on the view of several-year-experienced full-time teachers (who, after graduation, have not left their profession), yet the author concludes the thesis by proposing hints for changes or even reform in teacher education. It seems essential to reflect on this topic during the defence.

The second chapter describes the main characteristics of (teacher) education in Lebanon, yet the historical inputs are not clearly linked to the current conception of teacher education. It also appropriately explains the differences between the American and French-Patterned Universities (chap. 2. 5. 6), which makes the gap essential for qualitative research rather blurred. During the defence, providing more details about the current enrolment procedures at the university programmes, including data (if available) of the prospective students, drop-out rates, and successful graduates, would be appreciated as well. This might help to complete the comparative picture of the researched study programmes.

Surveying relevant resources across various contexts, Talar Agopian builds on the work of important scholars in his research design. Summarising the methodological background is the main aim of the third chapter. Six research questions are clearly stated, still the elaboration of the concepts of attitudes (RQ3) and quality (RQ4; quality vs effectiveness) is needed in order to assess the scope of answering of these two research questions through qualitative research. Both research methods are described, and the procedures used during data collection and analysis are hinted at. Nevertheless, more attention is paid to interviews in contrast with document analysis. Therefore, I would appreciate if the author could demonstrate, on a particular example, the data analysis of one document during the defence. Clarification of the language used during data collection is also highly needed not only because of different languages used in instruction at the compared universities (English as shown in the examples from data analyses or a different language?). Data collection and analysis procedures with regard to the language used in both of the methods should also be addressed during the defence. The author could explain what measures were taken to ensure that the meaning would not be lost in translation and from a broader perspective, to enhance the validity of the empirical research. The issue of language seems vital as it can be a tool for sharing understanding, but also for interpretation, categorization and unique conception of the world, including emotions or perception of time, which is reflected, among other things, in a different understanding of metaphors, the use of verbal means of pervasiveness, etc. It is unclear how the author treated during the interviews the fact that responses to emotion-provoking vs. neutral questions may be different in different languages (and communication

in a foreign language may increase cognitive load or act as distancing, etc.) and how the author encouraged participants' recall of events and phenomena with even three-year-gap? The chapter then involves the researcher's self-reflection and treatment of ethical aspects of research, which is appropriate for the chosen design.

The research sample for the interviews is well presented, but from the perspective of identifying points for further improvement, it would be inspiring to grasp the view of unsuccessful students who did not manage to finish university studies or at least include this in the limits of the research. Not all presented limits of the research are in line with the qualitative research design.

### **Findings of the dissertation**

The thesis submitted by Talar Agopian is an ambitious work which tries to cover an important topic in a rather unusual way, including the perspective of graduates (after certain time span, after overcoming diverse obstacles of real classroom teaching) and discussing other different aspects of teacher education from a comparative perspective. The results section presents an interesting thematic grasp, and the description of topics is rich but still relies only on modest data fragments. Avoiding comments such as "eleven participants said" (p. 102), or "only two participants suggesting" (p. 111) etc., when presenting themes identified through thematic analyses, would be preferable.

According to the methodological framework (broadly minimalist in terms of document analysis), there are features which trigger specific structures of teacher education, but these may also be responsible for some individual and context variations. Therefore, the strategy used to distinguish these variations from the challenges that need to be addressed by reform could be shared in a broader way during the defence as well.

### **Relevance of the thesis**

The dissertation thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of an important issue of teacher training. The candidate attempted to show the application of several specific theoretical assumptions to explain the changes needed in teacher education in selected six universities. Therefore, the contribution of the thesis is more linked to social practice. Equally important is the captured potential for future research.

### **Summary of the review**

In spite of certain reservations, the dissertation meets the requirements of a doctoral dissertation. The research is based on the introduced conceptual frame and it opens fresh perspectives of the main topic. Talar Agopian has demonstrated the capacity to conduct independent scientific research. Thus, I recommend the thesis for the oral defence.

Olomouc, August the 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024

Jana Poláchová Vaš'átková, m.p.