

For Immediate Release



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“Next Step Program” at AUB **graduates its first cohort of eager and independent citizens**

The Next Step program at the American University of Beirut (AUB) Continuing Education Center held its first graduation ceremony for ten of its students. The first-of-its-kind in the region, the program embodies AUB's vision for inclusion and access to education. It is a three-year transition program for youth and adults with intellectual challenges, offering an innovative educational environment, teaching life skills and vocational know-how necessary for employment as independent and contributing members of the community.

“We are present to witness a transformation that education can bring and the life-changing effect it has brought onto the Next Step graduates, their families, and everyone who has been touched by this outstanding program,” said AUB President Dr. Fadlo R. Khuri. “Next Step is a life-centered educational path to a more abundant life, just as AUB's motto is “that they may have life and have it more abundantly,” and it applies to all its students, including you, especially you. Next Step students have developed confidence over time, have learned by doing, and have pushed themselves beyond their boundaries so they can flourish as independent adults in charge of their own lives and of making their own choices.”

As each candidate was called to receive their certificate at the ceremony from President Khuri, a recorded video message played on stage. “Here, I have changed my views and thoughts on life and what an experience it was!” said Lama Wattar. “I thank my teachers for their love, wisdom, and tolerance.” Mariam Haidar said, “The Next Step program helped me reach my dream to grow strong and find a job.”

The program was initiated by the Lebanese Down Syndrome Association in collaboration with the Diet Center, Heritage College in Beirut, and OpenMinds, a fund established in connection with AUBMC's Special Kids Clinic to support individuals with special needs. The program

students live the AUB experience and have become known to many AUB students and staff as part of the community, frequenting the cafeteria or Jafet Library, or just enjoying the university campus.

“Our students persevered as they worked 8:30-4:00 over the past three years, and they did it despite all difficulties,” said Ziad Shaaban, director of AUB Continuing Education Center. “Our team has been resilient, they designed the program, they come up with ideas, call experts, and conduct numerous meetings and follow-ups. They had a vision that is turning out to become a project and an NGO. As for the parents, they have been our devoted partners. They trusted us and they really worked hard with us. It is the group work that made this program a success.”

The Next Step program daily trains the students on living skills, self-determination skills, money management, and employment skills. Alongside the classes, they complete required internship hours with companies and entities that collaborate with the program, including AUB's bookstore, Jafet Library, and cafeteria, to ensure independent living and employability, when possible. After being equipped through mentorship, tools, and strategies along with their technical or vocational training, students are offered a certificate that sets them on career paths that nurture their strengths and interests.

Six students are currently enrolled, and the program will re-open in January 2021 for registration in the spring term to welcome youth graduating from schools with inclusive programs and others who apply and are assessed by AUB's psychology and psychiatry departments as eligible to join the program.

“I made new friends at AUB,” said Omar Khaled at his graduation. “I have learned math and social skills and computer, and I am ready for a job now.”

The graduates are ready to take part in the community as productive adults. Some, like Zeina Salem at the Diet Center, are already registered staff with a social security number, and some are preparing to join the workforce with offers from various establishments, including AUB's library and cafeteria. Proud parents and mentors look at Salma Al Attar, Yasser Berjaoui, Ali Boustani, Zeinab Dagher, Reem Ariss, Mariam Haidar, Omar Khaled, Zeina Salem, Hiba Sirajuddin, and Lama Wattar with full respect and admiration at their dedication and determination to succeed and engage in the life they wish to attain.

“We are all filled with pride toward our students,” said Sawsan Wazzan Jabri, president of the Next Step program and owner of Diet Center Lebanon, who spoke about success stories and the achievements of the students. “When I look at our kitchen buzzing with our students working alongside our staff, I realize how resilient we in Lebanon will always be and I feel that all is fine

in the world. Our dreams are growing and our journey has begun, and with this amazing team of administration, teachers, and parents, Next Step has taken off at AUB."

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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 900 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 9,100 students. AUB currently offers more than 120 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 420-bed hospital.

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