

The University for Seniors Program at AUB: An Empowering Initiative for the Older Persons



Abla Mehio Sibai
Co-founder of the University
for Seniors
Faculty of Health Sciences
American University of Beirut

The University for Seniors (UfS) is a new life-long learning initiative at the American University of Beirut (AUB), the first of its kind in Lebanon and the Middle East. It gives older adults (who are 50 and above) the opportunity to share their wisdom and passion, to learn things they have always wanted to learn in a friendly



academic environment, and to interact socially with other seniors, AUB faculty and students. The program aims to create a new and positive face of aging in Beirut, Lebanon and the Middle East Region: one where adults remain intellectually and socially engaged, energized to learn new things, and active contributors to their communities.

The program offers a variety of activities: study groups, lectures, cultural travel programs, and intergenerational activities with AUB students. The uniqueness of AUB's University for Seniors lies in its three guiding principles:

- **Peer-learning:** participants share what they know and learn from each other. There are no paid teachers. Seniors with a passion and expertise for a certain subject volunteer to facilitate a study group or give a lecture.
- **Community-building:** The UfS adopts a membership concept whereby one joins a term rather than enrolls in a specific course. This reinforces the idea that one is part of the community of the University for Seniors. Social events are also organized during the terms to strengthen this principle.
- **Intergenerational connections:** Seniors are connected to the regular AUB student body. These intergenerational connections are created through multiple academic and extra-curricular activities on and off campus.

Educational and cultural programs for older people (called Universities of the Third Age; Institutes for Learning in Retirement; Elder Universities) are well established in many parts of the world, and are a great success. The idea for the University for Seniors at AUB was conceived in 2008 after hearing concerns from older adults that as they were living longer and healthier lives, few outlets existed for them to cater to their intellectual and social needs. Nothing expressly for older people, stressing 'learning for the pleasure of learning' and creating a community of like-minded learners, existed in Beirut, or the region. An extensive feasibility study was conducted between June 2008 and November 2009



consisting of focus group discussions, a survey of older AUB alumni, community meetings, and visits to similar successful programs in other countries in the US. This process convinced the team at AUB that a University for Seniors would be enthusiastically welcomed in Beirut. In Spring 2010, the University for Seniors was launched on experimental basis, where various activities were tested until Fall 2011 when the program became fully established with introduction of the membership concept. Experts and aficionados, all as volunteers, offer study groups and lectures on a variety of topics. The program includes also social events and organizes cultural travel programs inside and outside Lebanon.

The program has grown by word of mouth and beyond expectations. Its impact on the lives of its members has been the topic of two master students, showing a number of benefits and in various spheres including, cognitive (mental stimulation and growth), psychological (increased

self-confidence, motivation, as well as rejuvenation) and social (belonging to a community and making new friends with similar interests and preoccupations). Words such as 'the program has been life-changing' or 'it opened a whole new world for me' indicate that members are touched profoundly by the program and that a positive change has occurred in their lives. The program is increasingly being recommended by psychogeriatricians in the country for their patients. The UfS was also recently selected by WHO and the RAND Institute as one of the 10 most innovative community based initiatives in middle income countries that seek to empower older people and promote social cohesion and inclusiveness.

For more information about the University for Seniors program, you may call 01-350000 (ext 3632) or visit our website https://website.aub.edu.lb/rep/cec/uni_seniors/Pages/Activities.aspx