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Learning amid crisis: the impact of the ongoing conflict on the academic and personal lives of university students in Lebanon

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As the ongoing conflict in Lebanon escalates, it has deeply impacted various aspects of daily life, with significant consequences on students' academic and personal experiences. This research utilized real-time survey data from students at the American University of Beirut (AUB) to evaluate how the crisis affects their academic progress, personal lives, and the challenges associated with transitioning to online and hybrid learning models. An online survey ($n = 3,430$) was administered between October 5 and October 12, 2024, using Google Forms. The survey comprised four sections: sociodemographic characteristics, personal circumstances, academic impact, and personal well-being. The findings reveal widespread student displacement, disrupting both education and overall well-being. This study offers a critical evidence base, emphasizing students' urgent needs and providing the foundation for future investigations and the development of efficient crisis-assistance programs within higher education.

KEYWORDS

crisis, higher education, academic experience, mental health, Lebanon

1 Introduction

University students are essential to the advancement of knowledge and the future development of society. They have the ability to significantly impact positive change on a worldwide scale as future professionals, researchers, leaders, and policymakers (Spiel et al., 2018). However, the mental health of students is becoming more widely acknowledged as a serious public health issue (Stallman, 2010). Globally, studies have investigated the relationship between academic achievement and mental health globally, exploring various factors that impact students' academic and personal lives. For instance, Diab and Schultz (2020) demonstrated that academic underachievement is particularly frequent in areas experiencing continuous political violence and conflict, while a study in Ukraine revealed the devastating impact of war-related mental health challenges on students' academic performance (Pinchuk et al., 2025).

Lebanon, a small middle-income country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, has been struggling with significant crises, particularly following the 2019 economic collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2020 Beirut Port explosion. These events have had a profound impact on both public mental health and the education sector, which have been made worse by Lebanon's complicated historical and political background

(Maalouf et al., 2016; Suzanne, 2020; Halat et al., 2022; Kharroubi et al., 2024). The ongoing armed conflict has further exacerbated the negative consequences on students' academic performance, mental health, and general well-being. Students' grades, enrollment status, and behaviors are all affected, and many experience increased worry and anxiety as a result of family displacement and the loss of loved ones. For instance, research among Palestinian students demonstrated that exposure to political violence is strongly associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety (Ahmead et al., 2024).

Despite these challenges, research examining the impact of crises on university students in Lebanon remains limited. One study reported increased rates of anxiety, depression, and insomnia among students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Younes et al., 2021). Another study explored how financial stress negatively influences the well-being of students in Lebanese universities (Nasr et al., 2024). Furthermore, a study on the aftermath of the Beirut Port explosion found that most participants reported low well-being, which varied by academic level (Bouclaous et al., 2023). To our knowledge, no research has specifically investigated the impact of armed conflict on students' academic and personal lives in Lebanon. This study aims to fill this gap by providing real-time data to inform universities and government agencies of the critical needs facing this vulnerable population during an exceptionally challenging time.

2 Materials and methods

For nearly a year, Lebanon has faced escalating tensions along its southern border, with a severe increase in hostilities beginning in October 2024. Amid an ongoing economic collapse and numerous social challenges, the arrival of an active conflict has further intensified the strain on daily life. In response, the Lebanese government granted educational institutions the autonomy to decide between online and in-person learning modalities. This decision raised critical questions: Are students prepared to transition to online or hybrid learning models? Can they sustain their academic year under these conditions?

To address these questions, the Office of Student Affairs (OSA) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) conducted an online survey between October 5 and October 12, 2024, using Google Forms. The full survey instrument is provided in [Supplementary Appendix 1](#). The questionnaire included a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions, structured into the following components:

- **Socio-Demographic Characteristics:** Captured basic information on students' gender, educational level, and faculty affiliation.
- **Personal Circumstances:** Assessed students' current living arrangements.
- **Academic Impact:** Examined the effects of the crisis on students' academic experiences, including impacts on focus, access to necessary resources (such as internet connectivity and devices), and participation in online and hybrid learning formats.

- **Personal Well-Being:** Explored how the crisis impacted students' mental health and solicited input on preferred support services.
- **Open-Ended Question:** Provided space for students to share any additional concerns or insights.

Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous, with no penalties or consequences for non-participation. Participants were encouraged to ask questions or seek clarification before providing consent. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the American University of Beirut (AUB).

3 Results

Students from all faculties participated, yielding 3,430 responses from AUB's 8,575 student body, resulting in a response rate of 40%. [Table 1](#) compares the study sample with the overall AUB population distribution stratified by faculty. The percentage breakdowns closely mirror those of the overall AUB student body, indicating that our sample is a representative reflection of the university population.

The findings presented in [Table 2](#) reveal that nearly half of the students (48.3%) have been displaced due to the crisis. Among them, some are living in different cities or countries (19.6%), residing with family or friends (15.7%), or temporarily staying in shelters (12.3%). Academically, only 1.1% of students reported no impact on their ability to concentrate, while a vast majority (77.3%) reported a significant or total inability to focus on their studies under these conditions. Furthermore, nearly half (48.8%) have only partial access to the resources needed for studying, citing unreliable internet, reliance on mobile data, shared devices, and high connectivity costs. Only a small percentage (3.0%) reported having no access at all. While over half (63.7%) indicated they could participate in online learning, many face challenges such as poor connectivity, and 6.1% reported being completely unable to join online classes. Other reported challenges included displacement,

TABLE 1 Study sample and AUB population per faculty.

Faculty	Study sample n (%)	AUB population n (%)
Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences	189 (5.5)	490 (5.7)
Maroun Semaan Faculty of Engineering and Architecture	1225 (35.9)	2911 (33.9)
Faculty of Health Sciences	193 (5.6)	491 (5.7)
Faculty of Medicine	72 (2.1)	119 (1.4)
Rafic Hariri School of Nursing	108 (3.2)	319 (3.7)
Suliman S. Olayan School of Business	530 (15.5)	1506 (17.6)
Faculty of Arts and Sciences	1100 (32.2)	2740 (31.9)
Total	3417*	8576

*Thirteen AUB students did not report their faculty affiliation, resulting in a total of 3,417 responses for this question.

TABLE 2 Student survey results from the study sample ($n = 3,430$) include data on socio-demographic characteristics, personal circumstances, academic impact, and personal well-being.

Domain	Variable	n (%)
Socio-demographics	Gender	
	Male	1498 (43.8)
	Female	1898 (55.4)
	Prefer not to answer	27 (0.8)
	Educational Level	
	Freshman	203 (6.0)
	Bachelor's degree	2486 (72.9)
	Master's degree	496 (14.6)
	PhD	37 (1.1)
	Other	182 (5.4)
Personal circumstances	Are you currently displaced from your usual place of residence due to the crisis?	
	Yes	1646 (48.3)
	No	1608 (47.2)
	Prefer not to answer	156 (4.6)
	Where are you currently staying?	
	At my home	1536 (45)
	With family/friends	535 (15.7)
	In temporary housing/shelter	421 (12.3)
	In a different city/country	671 (19.6)
	Prefer not to answer	115 (3.4)
	Other	127 (4.0)
Academic impact	How has the ongoing crisis impacted your ability to focus on your studies?	
	No impact	39 (1.1)
	Slight impact	146 (4.3)
	Moderate impact	592 (17.3)
	Significant impact	1350 (39.5)
	Unable to focus at all	1292 (37.8)
	Do you have access to the necessary resources (e.g., internet, devices) to continue your studies?	
	Yes, I have full access	1649 (48.2)
	I have partial access	1667 (48.8)
	I have no access	103 (3.0)
	Are you able to actively participate in online learning?	
	Yes, I can join without any issues	969 (28.3)
	Yes, but I may face challenges (e.g., connectivity, time zone differences, etc.)	2178 (63.7)
	No, I cannot join due to lack of resources	207 (6.1)

(Continued)

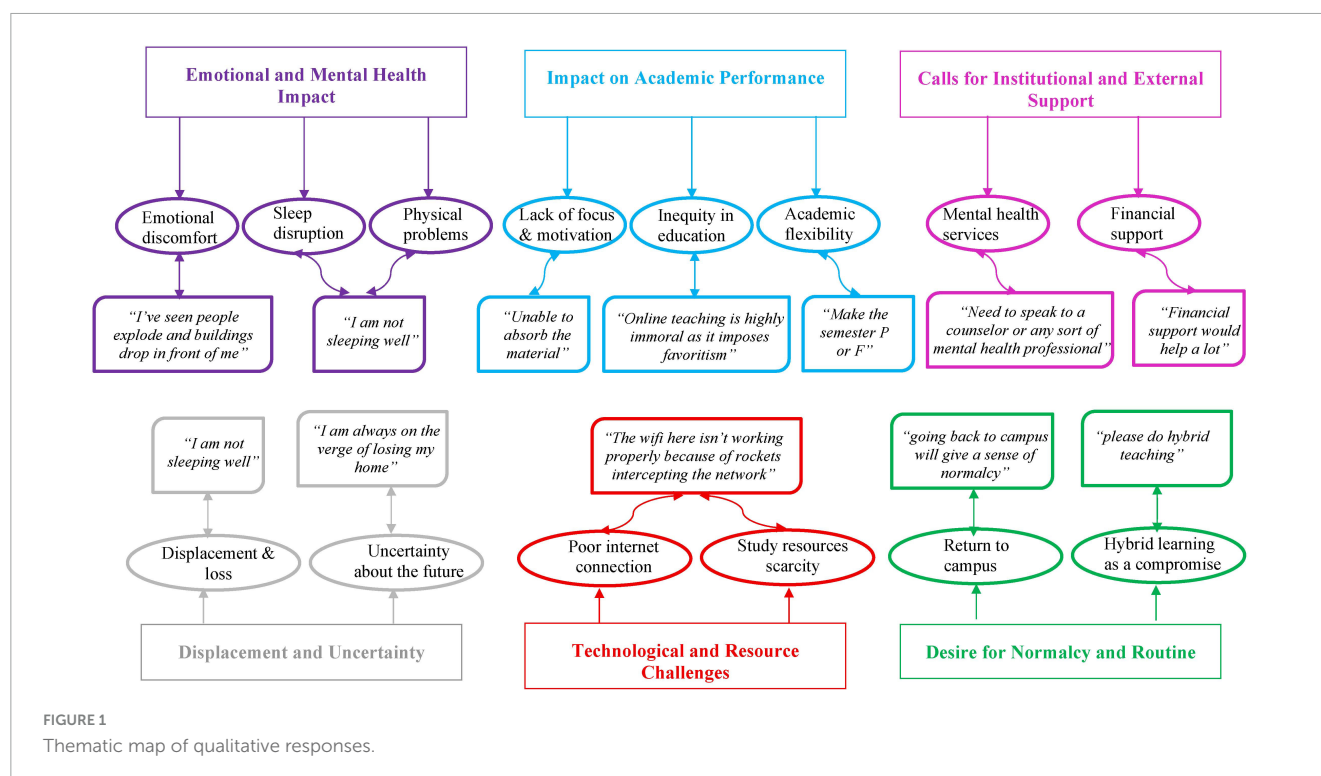
TABLE 2 (Continued)

Domain	Variable	n (%)
	Other	65 (1.8)
	Are you able to attend hybrid or on-campus learning?	
	Yes, I can attend without any issues	736 (21.6)
	Yes, but I face challenges (e.g., not immediate, long commute, travel restrictions)	1304 (38.2)
	No, I cannot attend due to travel or similar reasons	1231 (36)
	Other	137 (4.2)
Personal well-being	How has the crisis impacted your personal well-being (e.g., stress, mental health, safety)?	
	No impact	49 (1.4)
	Slight impact	216 (6.3)
	Moderate impact	687 (20.1)
	Significant impact	1357 (39.7)
	Severely impacted	1111 (32.5)
	What kind of support would be most helpful for you at this time? (Select all that apply)	
	Academic support (e.g., tutoring, flexibility in deadlines, academic advisor)	2910 (87.8)
	Mental health and counseling services	1135 (34.2)
	Financial assistance	1388 (47)
	Access to housing/accommodation	505 (15.2)
	Other (e.g., pass/fail, flexibility with exams. . .)	–

elevated stress, overcrowded living conditions, frequent power outages, and childcare responsibilities.

In terms of in-person learning, nearly 40% of students reported being unable to attend due to travel restrictions, lack of transportation, and safety concerns. In terms of personal well-being, more than two-thirds (72.2%) revealed that the crisis had significantly affected their well-being. According to many students, academic support and financial assistance were the most beneficial resources to help them during this difficult time.

Thematic analysis of qualitative responses illustrated in [Figure 1](#) underlined major emotional and academic struggles. Students reported increased emotional distress, sleep disruptions and physical health problems. Academic concerns varied from difficulty concentrating and diminished motivation to fears of unequal access to education. Flexible learning schedules and exam accommodations were called by many students, some even questioned the ethics of continuing the academic year under such severe circumstances. Mental health support and financial support were also needed. Moreover, students stressed resource shortages,



weak internet connection, and the difficulties of displacement. Despite these huge challenges, many still expressed hopes for a return to normalcy and the resumption of on-campus education.

4 Discussion

The findings of the current study align with previous research highlighting the significant impact of crises, including wars and political conflicts, on students' academic and personal lives. However, this study stands up with its real-time assessment of Lebanon's current crisis, with the conflict escalating sharply in October 2024. Several challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis has been examined in previous research in Lebanon, but this study is among the first to investigate the effects of an armed conflict on Lebanese university students.

The results underscore the urgent need for universities to rapidly adapt to the evolving needs of students during crises. Due to widespread displacement, almost half of the students raised concerns about accessing essential resources to continue their studies. According to this study, universities should develop more adaptable learning environments and improved crisis-assistance programs. For instance, universities can create emergency plans that incorporate online accommodations, alternative study schedules, and targeted support for students who are displaced.

Moreover, mental health challenges surfaced as a significant concern, with a vast majority of students considering that the crisis had negatively impacted their well-being. Thus, mental health support services, such as peer support groups, counseling, and stress management resources, should be incorporated by universities within their core offerings, especially that

anxiety, fear, and displacement are strongly associated with poor academic performance.

Thematic analysis of the open-ended survey responses provided further in-depth understanding of students' experiences (Thematic map: Figure 1). This analysis highlighted the severe emotional, academic, and practical difficulties that students encountered during the conflict happening in Lebanon. Some of the key themes that appeared were emotional discomfort, academic disruption, resource scarcity, and resilience. Common aspects that were reported by students were having trouble staying motivated, focusing, and feeling generally down. Many described the psychological effects of displacement and loss, revealing a profound sense of instability and insecurity. Moreover, students raised concerns about unequal access to education which highlights the pressing need for more flexible and equitable learning environments. Despite the overwhelming difficulties, a recurring theme of hope and perseverance emerged, as students expressed a desire for stability and a return to normal academic life. Besides the survey's quantitative results, these qualitative insights add a more comprehensive, multifaceted view of students' living circumstances and the extensive effects of conflict on higher education.

The current study allows future investigations into the long-term impacts of crises and displacement on students' academic paths and personal lives. Additionally, the study provides valuable insights for other higher education institutions—especially those with limited funding—and for Lebanese government aiming to develop plans to better assist impacted students.

The findings of this study should be considered in light of a few limitations. First, the sample was restricted to students from AUB, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to students at other universities in Lebanon. Second, the data collection relied on self-reported responses to assess the crisis's effect on AUB students' academic progress, personal lives, and the challenges

encountered in transitioning to online or hybrid learning models. Thus, these answers may be subject to errors due to memory recall bias or social desirability effects. Regardless of these limitations, the study provides important and timely insights into the real-time consequences of armed conflict on university students in Lebanon.

Data availability statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the privacy of participants and ethical concerns.

Ethics statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of the American University of Beirut (protocol code SBS- 2024-0412 and date of approval is November 18, 2024). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

SK: Software, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Project administration, Validation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1658341/full#supplementary-material>

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