

For Immediate Release



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## **AUB Organizes and Hosts ABLE Summit 2019:**

### **“Discussions on digital accessibility in higher education”**

“Special need or not, equal access is your right,” this slogan was used to campaign for the highly anticipated ABLE Summit 2019, that was held at the American University of Beirut (AUB), under the patronage of the President of the Council of Ministers Saad Hariri. The two-day event aimed to shed light on digital accessibility in higher education, and brought together renowned speakers from global leading organizations in industry and academia, to boost awareness, charge collective momentum, and trigger related initiatives.

This summit is the first its kind in Lebanon and the region. It is a product of ABLE (Accessibility for a Bolder Learning Experience), an initiative by AUB's Office of Information Technology, in collaboration with the university's Student Affairs Accessible Education Office.

The aim of this initiative is to increase the retention and success rates of students with disabilities, and to support their readiness for life after university by developing and deploying accessibility to campus-wide IT resources.

“ABLE also aligns with the UN Sustainable Developmental Goals, especially goal number four which is providing quality education and goal number ten which is reducing inequalities,” explained AUB IT Director Rami Farran.

The opening session was held on April 11, and included speeches by Dr. Fadlo R. Khuri, AUB president; Dr. Yousif Asfour, chief information officer at AUB; State Minister for Social and Economic Rehabilitation of Youth and Women Violet Khairallah Safadi who represented the President of the Council of Ministers Saad Hariri; and renowned Lebanese artist Georges Khabbaz. Preceding the speeches was a musical greeting by the choir of the Lebanese School for the Blind and Deaf.

“We want to make sure that anyone regardless of their needs has equal access to whatever technology has to offer. We also believe that technology should be used to enable everyone regardless of their needs to enjoy life and contribute to society,” said Asfour.

Khuri delivered the AUB welcome note, saying “In the MENA region, sadly, there is limited dedicated support for students with disabilities and the technology they need has been slow to arrive,” though educational programs, services, resources, and delivery methods are becoming more accessible in many parts of the world.

Khuri added, “At AUB, it is one of our overarching goals to make higher education available and accessible to everyone, without exception. We and our peer educational institutions in the region are at the very beginning of a long, but absolutely necessary journey towards being able to provide an entirely accessible higher education experience regardless of the diverse abilities of our students.”

He then spoke about the goals that AUB has set, on how to update its technological tools so that this university can serve the whole of society, not only in terms of physical accessibility, but also in the realm of digital accessibility.

AUB has been taking several steps towards fostering greater digital accessibility and inclusivity. These steps include implementing web-accessibility measures on the university's website following the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, and introducing accessible course design and authoring. Accessibility features are now available on all IT purchasing at the university; and a draft of accessibility policies is being prepared for submission to the Policies and Procedures Review Committee.

During her opening speech, Minister Khairallah Safadi said, “This initiative is very important as it gives a voice to our youth, to our women and to our students with disabilities. It merges education with technology to achieve what we once thought was impossible. It equally enhances social and economic inclusion for an important portion of our society.” She added, “Today disability remains a forgotten dimension of the work force, and a potentially valuable contribution of the disabled is often not considered.” The minister also spoke about the legislation law number 220 which was approved by the Lebanese Parliament in May 2000, and which secures the basic rights for the disabled. She noted that this law still needs to be properly implemented in many areas. “We need to make sure our system is better at supporting people with disabilities, allowing them to grow their potential and make systematic change.”

Khabbaz then moved the audience with his sincere inspirational greeting on how “we all have special needs, but at the same time, we all have our talents.”

The opening session was followed by “Able Experiences and Success Stories,” a session in which individuals with disabilities shared their stories and experiences on how they have overcome challenges and achieved their goals.

The ABLE Summit 2019 included talks; thematic tracks; as well as informative, know-how and collaborative sessions by international renowned speakers from leading organizations such as the European Disability Forum, British Assistive Technology Association, World Wide Web Consortium, and Human Rights Watch.

Industry leaders such as Microsoft and Apple also participated in the event, as well policy makers from governmental and nongovernmental entities such as the Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Education, YAB, LCD, ProAble, UNICEF, and United Nations. Different special needs schools, NGOs, and universities also took part in the various sessions.

The summit included an exhibition that displayed digital accessibility solutions and assistive technologies by industry leaders, for visitors to learn about the modern solutions available in the market.

Accessibility guidelines were followed in the event setup, where live transcription, translation, and sign language interpretation was available, as well as escort arrangements for guests who need special assistance. Cards were also utilized for guests to use when they found it difficult to follow the speaker.

In addition to the summit, ABLE is launching a joint project to implement digital accessibility in higher education across the board with a group of universities and governmental and nongovernmental entities.

“We need the message to reach every house, school and university as well as every student, parent, educator, consultant, technology expert and decision makers, that digital accessibility is as equally important as physical accessibility, if not more in education as well as independent living,” commented IT Business Development Manager at AUB Maha Zouwayhed.

**ENDS**

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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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