

*German student group led by Professor Escher and Andreas Wischnat visit LERC*  
*Professor Sensenig-Dabbous delivers talk*  
Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2010, LERC, NDU  
Reported by Elie Nabhan

The Lebanese Emigration Research Center at Notre Dame University, Lebanon, welcomed a group of eighteen German students from the University of Mainz, Germany, led by Professor Anton J. Escher, university lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Mainz and Director of the Centre for Intercultural Studies (ZIS), and guided by Mr. Andreas Wischnat, a research affiliate at LERC.

Professor Escher had previously visited LERC in April 2009 after being told of the Center by Mr. Wischnat.

The German student group was taken on a brief tour of the NDU campus by LERC IT specialist Mr. Elias Sfeir, before being shown into the NDU auditorium. Here they were joined by students of Professor Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous, Chairperson of the Departments of Political Science, Public Administration and Diplomacy (FPSAD) at NDU, and Acting Director of LERC.

Mr. Wischnat was first to speak, introducing Professor Sensenig-Dabbous and giving his brief biographical background to the students. Mr. Wischnat informed the students of Professor Sensenig-Dabbous's work as an author of two books and over 60 scholarly articles, including the publication he co-authored with Guita Hourani, *Insecurity, Migration and Return: the Case of Lebanon Following the Summer 2006 War*, published by the Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration (CARIM) in 2007.



Professor Sensenig at the podium delivering his lecture (Feb 2010).

Professor Sensenig-Dabbous presented to the students the challenges he encountered while researching for this topic in Lebanon for his lecture *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics in the Middle East*. Professor Sensenig-Dabbous went on to explain the difficulty of using Western research methods in the Middle East and encouraged the students to read widely to recognize sensitive topics that must be approached with care.

He mentioned the problems of working in non-democratic regions such as the Middle East where access to information is usually restricted by governments.



Professor Escher (second row fourth left) attends with both sets of students (Feb 2010).

Religion, he said, is the identity factor in the Middle East much as language is in Europe. Going back to the insecurity report he co-authored, he said questionnaires were issued and weighed up according to confessions. Another obstacle was the lack of citable sources. In authoritarian Arab countries it is notoriously difficult to gain information, while sources are not specified as is usual in the West

Lebanon, he pointed out, may appear more Western than other countries but still requires careful attention when approaching certain topics. Information is available here, but requires knowing the right people and having the right connections, as a prerequisite in order to push research further. Permits, he advised, are of crucial importance.

Professor Sensenig-Dabbous mentioned the work of Mr. Dennis Kumetat, *Lebanese Perceptions of German Middle East Policies and German Participation in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon*, in which he surveyed Lebanese opinion about Germany, German-Lebanese Relations, the emigration of Lebanese to Germany and the

role of the German army in UNIFIL. For this research LERC assisted him in finding the right people to interview and employing the right field surveyors.

Since Lebanon has held no census since 1932, surveys based on sampling are very difficult especially concerning the availability and accessibility to data, documents, statistics and the like.

Professor Sensenig-Dabbous went on to give a historical overview on the inception of LERC and its mission. LERC started out by studying Lebanese diaspora to cover transit migration, return migration and re-migration and family and social networks worldwide. He touched upon the important role that remittances play in Lebanese society.

LERC, he said, can advise on the possibility of doing applied research of a high academic standard. It is unique in being the only research center dealing with migration outside the First World.

Ms. Basma Abdel Khalek, LERC's Project Manager, elaborated further by introducing the students to LERC's electronic archives and taking the audience on a virtual tour. She pointed out that LERC collects all material relating to Lebanese migration, materials including photos, articles, dissertations and official or personal correspondences.



At the museum: Ms. Abdel Khalek shows original LERC materials to the German students (Feb 2010).

LERC, she said, is interested not only in the history of the Lebanese as a people but also in that of the Lebanese as a community living in their host countries. Cultural materials such birth and marriage certificates, identity cards, books, films and music are also welcome in the archives. Since LERC is also involved in historical migration, texts in English, Arabic, French, Spanish and Portuguese are found at the Center.



At the museum: Mr. Nabhan explains details about the Nigeria Collection (Feb 2010).

To conclude the event, the German student group were taken on a tour of the Lebanon and Migration Museum at NDU to see for themselves examples of original material displayed.

The student group were then shown around the LERC premises and resource library, where welcome refreshments were offered.



The German students pictured at the LERC resource library (Feb 2010).



Souvenir picture taken in the midst of the olive trees at NDU campus (Feb 2010).