Redefining the Transition from Education to Work in the Middle East
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Regional Context
The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have witnessed a “youth bulge” in their population pyramid, primarily correlated to the demographic evolution of the region, better education, and a decline in early marriages. This factor, coupled with an unemployment rate that stands at 30% for Arab youth, has created a sense of urgency for corporations, policy-makers, and educational institutions to create new jobs for the upcoming influx of new market entrants. In fact, confronted with more than 66 million youth and a tangible advancement in education, economies in the Arab world face challenges in their ability to match the demand for employment with the creation of a sufficient amount of jobs. This hence puts the region at the forefront of discussion given the increasing amount of plans, agendas and programs set in place to achieve a better future for upcoming and current generations.

The challenge, however, lies in the fact that unemployment spells tend to run longer for youth, and to a greater degree for the educated among them, while they search for a job that matches their skills. Therefore, the future of work does not solely mean new market entrants, but also the demand for new skills and the need for all key players to adapt accordingly.

This research focuses on a select few countries in the MENA region – who, among others, have developed an agenda to facilitate access to education for all – to understand their individual problems on a larger scale. Despite individual country-level efforts to address the challenge facing employability in the region, only focusing on equipping the youth of today with the right education for the jobs of tomorrow will lead to, one, growing competition and, two, a gap between the developed skills, the needed skills and the available jobs. With this gap being accentuated in MENA, it could cost the region up to 3 billion US dollars in GDP by 2030. Even on a global scale, it is estimated that “30-40% of workers in developed countries may need to change occupations or at least upgrade their skill sets significantly”, putting further pressure on all institutions to address this gap in talent before falling behind.
While the twenty-two states forming the Arab world share a fair amount of cultural homogeneity and history, the strategies they have set for the future are different in relation to their individual experiences. For example, countries in the Levant (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Jordan) and North Africa have been hit with similar crises pushing them to improve their educational system first, especially following the effect economic and political turbulence had on it. In parallel, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have developed visions that focus on transitioning from oil-based economies to knowledge hubs.

The UAE Vision 2021, for instance, has education as one of its main pillars with the goal to push for a spirit of entrepreneurship, increased education rate, and an economy driven by innovation, research, science, and technology. Among its diverse set of goals, Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 has developed the Human Capability Development Program whose aim is to establish a strong educational base, prepare youth for the future labour market, and upskill citizens by supporting innovation and entrepreneurship to ensure competitiveness.

Whereas in Jordan, the Ministry of Education has set a strategy for Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) that focuses on access to, and expansion of, preschool education as well as improvement of the quality of the workforce through innovative approaches. In 2014, Egypt also developed a strategy for pre-university education that envisions every child’s access to high-quality education by 2030 in order to facilitate their contribution to the
development of their own country as well as compete regionally and globally. After 11 years of war in Syria followed by the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic crisis, education for children and young adults has been severely disrupted. Associations – like the International Syrian Association for Education Development – have been working on developing the education system for Syrian students to facilitate their access to high quality academic knowledge and appropriate labour market skills. Similarly, Lebanon has witnessed a series of crises in the past 3 years that have hindered access to education for most students. The exodus of qualified teachers, the pandemic, the electricity cuts and fuel shortage have all put an additional weight on academic institutions. To mitigate this, the Lebanese Ministry of Education has been partnering with UNESCO to achieve the Five Year General Education Plan for Lebanon whose activities will be focused on providing education to younger children from all backgrounds.

Despite all the employment opportunities that the advancement of technology has created, the skills gap is still widening due to the limited availability of digital human capital in the region – with only 1.7% of the workforce considered as ‘digital talent’ in the MENA region. A change is therefore needed to create local digital talent which requires several key players – namely educational institutions, corporations, and governments & nonprofits – to work hand-in-hand to facilitate the transition from education to work and bridging the gap between talent and demand. This is where the urgency to re-imagine early talent engagement, as well as to unlearn / relearn, manifests; it should be a continuous process that ensures the sustainability of education and corporations in the long-run.
A change is therefore needed to create local digital talent. This requires commitment from a variety of key stakeholders, namely educational institutions, corporations and governments.
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The Reshaping of Work Post-Pandemic

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), decent work “sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace [...] equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men”.

With the COVID-19 pandemic leading to one of the largest global disruptions to work ever, the prospect of ‘decent work’ has been jeopardised and its notion reshaped. Widespread job losses gave way to tight labour markets, partially affected by ‘The Great Resignation’ – a term first used by psychologist and professor Anthony Klotz – driven by low pay, no opportunities for advancement, and unfavourable working conditions. Jason Grundy, managing director of Robert Walters Middle East and Africa stated that “any companies who did not adequately reward their staff at the beginning of this year have potentially put themselves at risk of losing some of their best assets”. This makes it increasingly difficult for corporations to retain talent and avoid a bidding war for their own employees. Beyond this, the lockdown’s short-term consequences included the fall of a number of sectors – such as hospitality and tourism – to give way to remote work settings and virtual workplaces. It has in fact accelerated the emergence of a new digital trend that will challenge and shift the existing working patterns; for instance, around 14% of jobs in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries is expected to become fully automated while 32% will shift to partial automation.

In their report about the future of work after COVID-19, McKinsey additionally identified trends that may reshape the nature of work after the pandemic: 20 to 25% of the workforce in advanced economies could see themselves working from home more frequently; the use of automation and AI may be accelerated in arenas with high physical proximity, and as many as 25% more workers might have to switch occupations than before the pandemic. This will primarily affect young people and adults with more basic skills, bringing the focus back to, first and foremost, the need to bridge the gap between education at a younger age and the nature of future jobs and to support people in navigating this future through providing them with the right skills.

The numbers are even more alarming for the MENA region due to an increased need for employment opportunities to match the larger share of people of working age. As is shown in the below chart, three reports compiled by Arabnet showcase the lack of skills availability around hardware and IT, development/coding, product design, and data analytics in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia (See Chart 1). This is a major setback for youth and...
Transitioning from Education to Work in the Middle East

young adults trying to integrate the market; with the ever-expanding nature of technology and work as we know it, the opportunity to re/upskill is a priority to have in both the educational systems and corporations. The skills gap will eventually put corporations and nations at risk of falling behind, reducing productivity and decreasing standards of living. Nevertheless, as tech-savvy individuals, the young population has the potential to be upskilled and integrated into a digital economy, particularly when focusing on younger children and not solely on fresh graduates.

It is important to note that the workforce is not the only one at risk of facing challenges in the future world of work; in fact, employers need to start adapting to the unexpected demand for technology, further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, then learn how to balance it with human skills. A report developed by Dell Technologies, in partnership with Institute For The Future (IFTF) and 20 experts from around the world, identifies five barriers to becoming a successful digital business by 2030: lack of a digital vision and strategy, with 61% of businesses held back by this constraint globally, lack of workforce readiness, technology constraints, time and money constraints, as well as law and regulations.  

Five barriers to becoming a successful digital business by 2030:

1. LACK OF A DIGITAL VISION AND STRATEGY
2. LACK OF WORKFORCE READINESS
3. TECHNOLOGY CONSTRAINTS
4. TIME AND MONEY CONSTRAINTS
5. LAW AND REGULATIONS

Chart 1: Skills Availability By Market (Christidis, 2021)
“As organizations are embarking in the journey of unlearning, cultural transformation becomes a key integral part of the journey. In today’s world, unlearning is a form of future readiness to navigate uncertainty, embrace agility and demonstrate humility. Organizations are expected to enable a safe environment to initiate and progress the conversations.”

LAMA GEBARA, HEAD OF HR AT COGNIZANT MIDDLE EAST.

With the introduction of paradigm shifting innovations, corporations now have the responsibility to establish an early and sound dialog with academic institutions and families as early in youth’s educational path as possible. Take for example Meta – an American multinational technology conglomerate – which is building the ‘Metaverse’ through new technologies that will help people socialise, learn, and collaborate in innovative ways. There also are edtech initiatives such as Launchmycareer.com (Dev Clever’s Holdings PLC) platform that connects learners to careers by determining, in a gamified way, a learner’s individual personality profile, combined with their personal interests, preferred working styles, their skills and desired study pathways to arrive at a series of careers they can understand about in an immersive and engaging way whereby employers provide digital immersive content on the platform as part of their Employer Branding. In essence, this organisation has helped bridge the employer skills and experience gap with educational institutions faster, leveraging technologies that may be at play in youth’s next career move.

As the future of work is changing exponentially, it is essential for individuals to keep up with the constant shift in the workplace as much as it is essential for corporations to adapt and encourage internal re/upskilling. The reshaping of work post pandemic has been a demonstration of how fast key players need to adapt to new changes; further proof that the unlearn/relearn movement is primarily a collaborative notion focused on bringing about transformational change for upcoming generations. A smooth education-to-work transition, therefore, cannot be achieved without a holistic approach bringing all relevant stakeholders together. As Marian Wright Edelman – an American activist for civil rights and children’s rights – stated: “you can’t be what you can’t see” and, in a sense, stakeholders cannot be the future of work without understanding its prospect. The current sentiment is that technology can play an important role linking the agendas, challenges and opportunities among these educational institutions, corporations and governments.

Another element in that equation would also be the enablement of the right culture. As stated by Lama Gebara, Head of HR at Cognizant Middle East: “As organizations are embarking in the journey of unlearning, cultural transformation becomes a key integral part of the journey. In today’s world, unlearning is a form of future readiness to navigate uncertainty, embrace agility and demonstrate humility. Organizations are expected to enable a safe environment to initiate and progress the conversations.”
A recent report developed by Deloitte expresses the risks that come with failing to bridge the skills gap: “[it] may leave an estimated

2.4 million

POSITIONS UNFILLED BETWEEN

2018 — 2028

WITH A POTENTIAL ECONOMIC IMPACT OF

$2.5 trillion

However, with 85% of jobs not created yet, bridging the skills gap requires starting from a younger age to facilitate the transition from education to work before reaching graduate studies. The issue in this case is the little exposure young people have to the world of work, the entire focus in schools and universities lies in assimilating and validating knowledge rather than reinforcing career-ready skills development. Dr. Mohamad Harb, specialised in Mechanical Engineering and a current professor at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon, mentions that the future of work will entail more demand for entrepreneurs, people who are willing to get out of the box, and innovative designers rather than bureaucratic workers. However, academic institutions do not invest enough in students’ soft skills and autonomy; in fact, jobs are currently very similar to the education received in the MENA region: students are obliged to do what they are told which limits their innovativeness and curiosity. Dr. Harb also states that “schools need to do their homework and try to bring their industry to the classroom and offer a course where students have to work towards identifying a challenge and solving it”.

As such, Moldoveanu et.al pinpoint ways in which corporations, governments and multilaterals can support in bridging the global skills gap. The first step is to ask: what skills does your organisation / country need in order to be able to gradually build a generation of workers suitably fit for both a digital and practical world of work. One could argue that in order to assign skills to needs, a careful personality and skills profiling is paramount. For instance, Emeritus offers a high quality online learning experience to get the in-demand skills for the jobs of tomorrow and take one’s career to the next level. Their innovative approach to education offers curriculum innovation, senior faculty, hands-
on instruction, online courses, blended programs, and intensive boot camps all of which can be navigated and selected with the assistance of an advisor. As such, once there is an understanding of which skills are needed within any organisation, and who can best benefit from them, the process of unlearning and relearning becomes more straightforward.

Another way forward is to leverage corporate training outside of corporations. While internal methods are used to develop current employees’ skills, it is time to start thinking about their future team. Creating joint platforms to facilitate the access to skills training courses, job counselling, and job portals will also allow for a more seamless transition from education to work. This can be incorporated by governments, such as ministries of labour and education, in partnership with universities and online learning platforms. One example includes Coursera, an open online course provider that teams up with universities and corporations to offer online courses and certifications in a diverse set of subjects, which has witnessed a booming period during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, Coursera introduced a new career training academy – Career Academy for institutions – that allows any business, government, or academic institution to provide individuals with the opportunity to learn new skills as well as upskill and reskill entire populations of students, workers and employees.

The associate Director at Robert Walters, Jonathan Berry, lists four potential solutions to help bridge the skills gap:

“i) Widen the search criteria whereby considering professionals who have not taken the traditional route might lead to higher productivity. Transferable skills are considered far more valuable nowadays than a relevant university degree.

ii) Utilise senior leaders: it is the exposure to seeing leaders tackle problems, or share ideas, where future skills are born.

iii) Leverage from training outside one’s company: as aforementioned, by pairing elements from best-of-class corporate programs with a government-led national policy framework, together stakeholders can help create high-quality skills development programs relevant to national and local populations, efficiently achieves scale, and doesn’t need to be built from the ground up.

iii) Digital skills verification: Establishing a global or national skills verification system enables employers to identify the most sought-after skill sets for their current employees and set up new hires for success by identifying what additional training they should consider”.

LAUNCH MY CAREER WORKS TOWARDS CONNECTING EMPLOYERS WITH LEARNERS AT AN EARLY STAGE WITH THE GOAL TO INSPIRE THROUGH IMMERSIVE CONTENT, AND HIGHLIGHT THE SKILLS REQUIRED FOR THE FUTURE WORLD OF WORK.
Nevertheless, bridging this gap does not rely solely on up/re-skilling fresh graduates and current employees, K-12 education is also a main component in ensuring children grow up with the necessary skills to fit in the labour market. In fact, youth education is increasingly focusing on social-emotional learning (SEL) as a process towards developing “self awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work, and life success” and which cannot be replaced by machines.

As such, the OECD has been gradually looking into highlighting the role of social-emotional learning through ‘The Study on Social and Emotional Skills’ that surveys 10-15 year old students around the world. An interesting finding shows that “social and emotional skills [are] directly affecting a variety of job outcomes, such as occupational status and income, on top of their indirect effect through educational outcomes.” This is to show that concentrating on soft / human skills is as important as building a workforce that is comfortable and familiar with AI and automation.

Therefore, guiding young children towards accumulating such skills will make it easier for them to engage in new ways of working with diverse populations and in a challenging work environment. Similarly, allowing current employees to upgrade their skills within the same company will increase retention and willingness to show growth.
As seen in previous sections, there has been an overall lack of focus on enabling children with the right skills for the jobs of tomorrow. Educators therefore play a vital role, if not the most important, in preparing the youth of today to learn, unlearn, and relearn in order to adapt to the ever changing world of work.

Adapting the educational models of today also means understanding that, one, the in-demand twenty-first century skills are nothing like what has been taught in the past and, two, education must start to reflect the rapid digitization taking place across all industries. Said skills do not necessarily have to be standalone courses, but can instead be embedded in curriculum and programs that will properly guide the youth.

While higher education is a step further towards attaining the desired skills, proper K-12 education is the effective remedy for unemployment and chronic poverty, making ‘Quality Education’ one of the Sustainable Development Goals most integrated in national agendas. In fact, students with “no more than lower-secondary education account for over 30% of NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training), and are three times more likely to be NEET than those with a university-level degree.”

As mentioned in the introduction, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt – among other countries in the Middle East and neighbouring areas – have put in place long-term plans to increase enrollment in schools as well as quality and inclusive education.

Nevertheless, the nature of education as we know it will also have to incorporate technology to provide inspirational, immersive experiences that learners are not otherwise getting today. The World Economic Forum outlined an education framework that will assist academic institutions in shifting learning content and experiences towards the needs of the future.

The list first includes skills that promote content such as i) global citizenship skills that encourage...
building awareness, sustainability, and playing a wider role in the global community; ii) innovation and creativity skills including complex problem solving and analytical thinking; iii) technology skills; and iv) interpersonal skills that focus on emotional intelligence and social awareness. Now that the essence of what should be taught is laid down, the remaining question in this case is how will the educational system deliver these skills?

Based on data released by the OECD in 2017, about a quarter of school heads say that their institutions lack adequate digital technology for teaching and, if accessible, teachers report they do not possess the proper skills to fully exploit the available digital resources. At the time, only 56% of teachers in OECD countries received training in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which is not enough if educators are meant to be the part of the school-to-work transition.

Consequently, the second part of the World Economic Forum’s framework lists competencies related to learning experiences: i) personalised and self-paced learning, flexible enough to enable students to learn at their own pace; ii) accessible and inclusive learning; iii) problem-based and collaborative learning that requires peer collaboration and mirrors the future of work; and iv) lifelong and student-driven learning in which everyone continuously improves existing skills and acquires new ones as they go.

Virtual Reality (VR) is an immersive tool already pervasive in numerous contexts. It allows learners to take part in real-life experiences without the dangers, time-consumption, and costs associated with day-to-day jobs – such as attending or performing surgeries. Dev Clever’s Veative is one actor that is effectively putting this into practice through their VR headsets, built specifically for education, to provide a breadth of content - the world’s largest library of interactive and curriculum-aligned VR content for STEM in line with clear learning objectives - with adequate attention to privacy and security. An interview conducted with Dr. Senthil Nathan – Founder of Edu Alliance, current Management Consultant, and former Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Higher Colleges of Technology in Abu Dhabi – reveals why innovative methods of learning are essential. For digital natives, innovative teaching and learning is natural and brings the best out of them; this type of learning simulates what the graduate would face in the workplace therefore transforming the process of education into a development tool.

Similarly, learning to understand and manage artificial intelligence (AI) is a great step towards ensuring that the youth of today will be successful now and in the future. Take for example Intel AI for Youth – a flagship program of Intel Digital Readiness efforts – whose hands-on program empowers young people by equipping them with AI technical and social skills in inclusive ways. This way, students will be prepared to join an evolving workforce as they recognize AI’s place in the future of work.
As such, education is the formative step in building a career-ready workforce and it has the potential to be further elevated in order to incorporate immersive ways of learning rather than traditional ones. With the COVID-19 pandemic, e-learning, the rise of digital platforms, and remote working have made the future of education and work closer than anticipated; schools, universities and workplaces needed to adapt fast. While the first lockdown was difficult for corporations and the educational sector, they both experienced a glimpse of what the future has to offer and realised it is something they can, and have to, invest in. As Dr. Senthil mentioned, the “quick transition to online learning imposed by the pandemic forced all academic institutions to take the plunge whether they were ready or not. While this has helped address some of the reservations about online learning, this quick band-aid approach largely moved traditional approaches to online medium without taking advantage of what online education could provide in terms of adaptive learning, VR, AI, and such. Hence, authentic online learning must quickly replace the band-aid solutions that are prevalent now, especially if we are to sustain the interests of the learners.”

DR. SENTHIL NATHAN, FOUNDER OF EDU ALLIANCE AND FORMER DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR AT HIGHER COLLEGES OF TECHNOLOGY IN ABU DHABI.
Opportunities For Corporations

Much like educators, corporations need to encourage their existing and future employees to learn, unlearn, and relearn as they go forward, as well as equip themselves with new capabilities. In order to attract early and emerging talent, corporations have to be part of the education-to-work transition as much as academic institutions.

The objective of being part of this journey is that, first, all young people are inspired and clear about career led learning pathways they can pursue in order to be the best version of themselves and, second, employers can benefit from preparing tomorrow’s future workforce with the relevant behaviours, knowledge and skills they require in order to grow their businesses. With a staggering unemployment rate amongst youth in the Arab world, even though the workforce is overflowing with candidates, an important asset to one’s corporation would be offering training that answers to the skills mismatch. Providing such resources to young students will not only help bridge the skills gap but also facilitate recruitment for corporations.

Technology also makes learning more personal so that it targets individual needs at convenient times and means. With growing numbers of learning platforms providing different curricula formats, organisations have the opportunity to “craft approaches that allow their workers to learn as and when they see fit”\(^3\). The idea here is that the skills gap challenge cannot be looked at independently whereby educational institutions cannot do everything alone; essentially, including K-12 children into this discourse should be a top priority for communities, schools, universities, corporations and government funnels as well.

Furthermore, Employee Value Proposition (EVP) – i.e. “the set of attributes that define the value prospective candidates and employees gain through employment by an organisation”\(^3\) – has also been on the rise following the need to appeal to the future workforce and, most importantly, retain it. These benefits should also encompass the opportunity to re/upskill within the organisation, particularly since today’s candidates want to see a clear path forward and have the resources to do so.
“The only way to prepare today’s learners for the jobs of tomorrow is through big data and personalised data.”

BILAL SHAMMOUT, CEO OF MASSARAT FZCO

The reason EVP should matter to corporations in the first place is the fact that talent has become scarce, which urges organisations to make their workplace more compelling than others. To understand this challenge within the MENA countries, it is essential to note that this region has suffered great job losses, as well as a decline in education, following the COVID-19 pandemic and political instability within the region. Despite this, a 2021 PwC survey revealed that “46% of organisations in the Middle East felt that the ability to adjust the workforce in response to market changes is very important” and “35% strongly agreed to being able to do so”32. Hence, leaders will have to lean into data and understand how it can be used to support future decision making in order to make progress on their digital agenda and address urgent challenges32.

The CEO of Massarat FZCO – the world’s first aggregator of K-12 educational data through a unique online testing platform – Bilal Shammout believes “the only way to prepare today’s learners for the jobs of tomorrow is through big data and personalised data”. Massarat’s mission is to disrupt education by encouraging schools to provide every student with personalised data and insights collected throughout their K-12 education.

Therefore, being part of this transition allows corporations to scout early talent, shape the upcoming workforce, and re/upskill their own team. They have an opportunity to be prepared for the future of work without being faced with the sudden risk of not having skilled workers.
Opportunities For Governments

The third player in this school-to-work transition is the government and its intrinsic link with high quality education and the labour market.

Even though the countries forming the Middle East (and North Africa) region have significant differences in political, social, and economic conditions, youth unemployment is a common challenge amongst all of them. Saudi Arabia and Jordan for instance have one of the highest rates with 42% among nationals and 36% respectively; in some cases even – such as Lebanon and Syria – this unemployment is further exacerbated by severe instability within the region.

However, in line with SDG4 (Quality Education), SDG5 (Gender Equality), and SDG8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), ministries in the Middle East have developed similar visions for providing youth with opportunities for quality education and, later on, employment opportunities. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic put an abrupt halt in the implementation of these agendas particularly in regions with higher vulnerability; for instance, in a survey conducted by the Lebanese American University (LAU) in partnership with the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS), the authors revealed that not all students had equal access to learning in Lebanon with 35% of nationals, 51% of refugee students, and 25% of teachers reporting that their internet connection is weak. Additionally, 22% of refugee students and 3% of national students reported not having access to the internet at home. This is why policy-making must take into account the disparities between countries and the extent to which they can implement said policies.

As such, governments have to partner with educational institutions and corporations to redefine the transition from education to work through facilitating access to a diversified set of skills, ranging from technical, to academic, to soft and transferable ones. Dima Najim, Managing Director at Education for Employment - Global – the leading nonprofit job placement network in the Middle East and North Africa – shared that facilitating the transition from education to work is a collaborative work between NGOs, educational institutions and governments whereby the biggest responsibility falls on the two latter while corporations’ objective
is to coach the current, and future, talent pool. She also explains that “NGOs make sure to advocate for system change as training is not enough in the long-run, change has to happen when it comes to ensuring youth are equipped with the right tools”.

In order to approach the issues discussed in the previous sections, national curricula should be able to include new solutions such as: i) investing in digital fluency and ICT literacy skills whereby governments encourage vocational training within the ICT sector and push businesses to provide classes beyond their own workforces; ii) provide learners with early exposure to workplace and career guidance coupled with proactive approaches to anticipate future needs in growing sectors through an efficient public-private sector partnership; and iii) creating a culture of lifelong learning to build a more resilient talent pool in the region.

Similarly, McKinsey suggested a blueprint that can help governments achieve this smooth transition. The framework calls for the development of a national strategy for technology adoption, the reform of human capital development starting from early childhood to adult learning, rethinking social protection (including EVPs), and finally mobilising all players on the future-of-work road map.

In his 2019 policy briefing covering “Youth Employment in the Middle East and North Africa: Revisiting and Reframing the Challenge”, Nader Kabbani recommends four key points that can serve to improve policymakers’ and youth-serving organisations’ governance structures and processes. He first starts with highlighting the importance of renewing the Call to Action; in fact, organisations must have a laser focus on addressing the challenge of the skills gap and, intrinsically, the school-to-work transition despite the lack of success in improving youth employment.

Consequently, unlocking the job creation potential comes next through addressing the “structural impediments to improving the business and regulatory environments”, this will require a seamless cooperation between government and implementing bodies. Then, monitoring and evaluating the impact of programs and initiatives is necessary to make sure youth-serving organisations are effectively reaching marginalised groups especially in the context of the MENA region. His final recommendation includes improving coordination between government agencies, international organisations, nongovernmental organisations, research centres, the private sector, and donors in properly executing visions and agendas.

By redefining the transition from education to work at the government level, it becomes easier for learners to adapt more quickly and understand the future needs of corporations. It also facilitates a seamless communication between stakeholders at all levels; if youth policies are put in place at earlier stages, it will then be easier for schools and universities to follow suit for instance.
Into the Future World of Work
“Students leave universities and learn such skills alone which shows the importance of online training but also the disconnect between schools/universities and the industry. Academia therefore needs to imagine what jobs will look like, step outside their own research and see the bigger picture.”

Dr. Mohamad Harb, Specialised in Mechanical Engineering and a current professor at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon.

As can be deduced from the above information, the primary solution towards facilitating the transition from education to work would be equipping youth, starting from K-12, with the right tools and opportunities to develop their future world of work awareness and skills. This can be further pushed by embedding digital content and experiences (strong digital literacy, access to up and coming tech and trends like coding, AI and Virtual Reality) in parallel to a young person's academic study; as such, early talent needs to be career-ready when leaving education all while being prepared to un/relearn as they grow. Edtech cannot be seen as a nice-to-have asset anymore, it now is essential in the development of skills required for the future of work.

Nonetheless, several challenges have obstructed the path towards achieving an immersive and rich education-to-work transition. The first barrier manifests at the school and university level whereby the lack of time within the school curriculum, scheduling, and funding leads to less prioritisation on incorporating immersive technology into the education of youth. Coupled with the limited knowledge some professors have on ICT / technology use, this issue will eventually result in educational systems falling behind the ever-growing domain of digitalisation, AI, VR, automation, and others. As Dr. Mohamad Harb mentioned, “students leave universities and learn such skills alone which shows the importance of online training but also the disconnect between schools/universities and the industry. Academia therefore needs to imagine what jobs will look like, step outside their own research and see the bigger picture”. This is further exacerbated in the Middle East where i) youth is the fastest growing segment with approximately 60% of the population under 25 highlighting the urgent need to match their skills with emerging jobs, and ii) political instability renders basic education less attainable than in other regions.

Findings shared by Education for Employment (EFE) reveal that in 2021 over 56,000 youth applied to EFE’s training programs across the MENA region. Among those who were unemployed and looking for a job: 30% pointed out the lack of opportunities in the job market as the main obstacle to finding a job, 29% said that the lack of experience is the reason, while 10% said their area of education is not relevant to the job opportunities in the market. The youth even listed other reasons as simple as not having good CV writing skills, interview skills, and job search resources.
Dima Najeem adds: “this confirms that the lack of opportunities, especially opportunities relevant to youth’s education, is a significant challenge that youth face when they start their job search. In addition to the lack of opportunities, youth struggle to meet employers’ expectations. Therefore, bridging the skills gap is extremely important, but it’s more important to provide youth with an education relevant to the job market needs”.

There are, however, consequences that come with failing to anticipate needed qualifications, knowledge, and skills for the jobs of tomorrow. The World Government Summit describes it as a danger to sustainable business development as well as a waste of human, social, and financial capital which can, in the long run, represent the loss of several trillion euros in Europe alone. Not changing the current set of courses can lead to challenges at different levels; starting on the individual one, a large number of fresh graduates will not be able to find employment that matches their skills, meaning they will either be unemployed altogether or not employed at their full productivity potential. In turn, skills mismatch will eventually have negative effects on the competitiveness and profits of corporations; a recent study by the Korn Ferry Institute predicted a $8.5 trillion of unrealised revenue by 2030 if talent shortage continues expanding.

At the regional level, this unrealised revenue will materialise into lower return on investment, productivity, competitiveness, and, eventually, the loss of local talent in favour of immigration to more equipped countries.

As explained in the research’s outlined sections, the prevention of shortage in talent is based on clear communication between corporations and nonprofits, educational institutions, and governments. In a time during which the education system has to be restructured, initiatives from corporates and recruiters to re/upskill the emerging, and current, talent pool are essential. No one can predict the future nature of work better than workplaces themselves; therefore, extending assistance in the form of courses, training, certifications, etc. will help recruiters shape a more productive workforce. This has been on numerous tech enablers’ agendas and other corporations whose objective is to continuously be part of the un/relearn experience. Additionally, policy adjustment would facilitate the aforementioned transition through the establishment of a clear set of national objectives for youth. National laws, strategies, and policies for skills development and youth employment are mandatory catalysts towards, one, reshaping curriculums in line with the skills gap and, two, allowing young people to feel a sense of belonging by including them in this discourse. In their findings on “Upskilling Efforts By The Public Sector”, PwC share the key role of governments in the upskilling of their workforce; while the work does not solely rely on public authorities, “a cohesive national upskilling plan paired with the necessary investments can serve as the springboard to encourage more businesses and citizens to prioritise upskilling”. This relates back to the significance of having clear communication between all stakeholders for a seamless transition across all levels.
Conclusion

"Edtech became the education system’s backbone, especially during and after the pandemic, as the school-to-work transition needs to re-engineer the fourth industrial revolution and redefine career-leading based skills.”

RABIH BAALBAKI, PRESIDENT OF MENA EDETECH ALLIANCE.

It is time for change, the time to join the pledge of jump-starting a movement to carry the conversation forward with positive impact and actions in order to guarantee the attainment of future, and current, talent. The most important aspect of the unlearn/relearn message is to get corporations, schools and universities as well as public authorities to buy-in on starting the process of re-imagining early talent engagement and the up/re-skilling the workforce. There are trillions of dollars at stake and the future and prosperity of both business and generations of workforce employees.

An opportunity for a rapid and disruptive transformation is to successfully embed employers in a young person’s early learning experience by starting to develop future world of work behaviours and knowledge, and acquire the skills to properly apply them.

Therefore, the primary take-away from this research is the need to create a holistic approach that links all main stakeholders in a common thread; the education-to-work transition cannot be managed by a single node of said thread. It is essential for educational institutions, corporations and governments – among other key players – to have a clear vision of what the future of work is looking like and how they can seamlessly guide youth towards it. This brings us directly back to the pledge of the unlearn/relearn movement: encourage young people to become the best version of themselves from a young age with the aim to bring the most influential and socially conscious organisations in the Middle East together to inspire the next generation.

All of this comes with the risk of technology’s dual role: creating a fast changing and uncertain environment while being a key enabler to solve the skills-employee gap. As seen throughout this research, the lack of ‘digital talent’ is one of the largest threats to the future of work as we know it. However, despite that, investing in securing access to students in a consistent, safe and scalable way from a young age can lead to a more productive and tech-ready workforce. Immersive and rich content has become essential in the development of young people’s skills to match the future job market; Rabih Baalbaki – President of MENA EdTech Alliance – states that “Edtech became the education system’s backbone, especially during and after the pandemic, as the school-to-work transition needs to re-engineer the fourth industrial revolution and redefine career-leading based skills”. Findings even suggest that the pedagogical benefits that come with using immersive media in education include better customisation, increased creativity and less risk, higher student engagement, enhanced motivation, as well as upgrading traditional learning by offering experiences that would otherwise be inaccessible.

There is an inevitable criticality to be part of the change and avoid the massive size of problems associated with not changing the set course we have at the moment. If action is not taken at all levels, the skills gap will remain an issue that snowballs every year without a clear way to predict its trajectory.
References


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Disclaimer
This research has been developed as a contribution to the Unlearn/Relearn movement and in association with its sponsors. The Unlearn/Relearn movement is a global movement that supports and prepares young people for their personal career journey by inspiring them to be the best version of themselves.